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TiVo time!
Virgin's PVR, p84



Reviewed ANTHEM MRX 700 AV RECEIVER
JVC X7 D-ILA PROJECTOR **TOSHIBA STOR.E TV PLUS**

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Panasonic's giant 85in 3D plasma tested
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TRUE BLOOD
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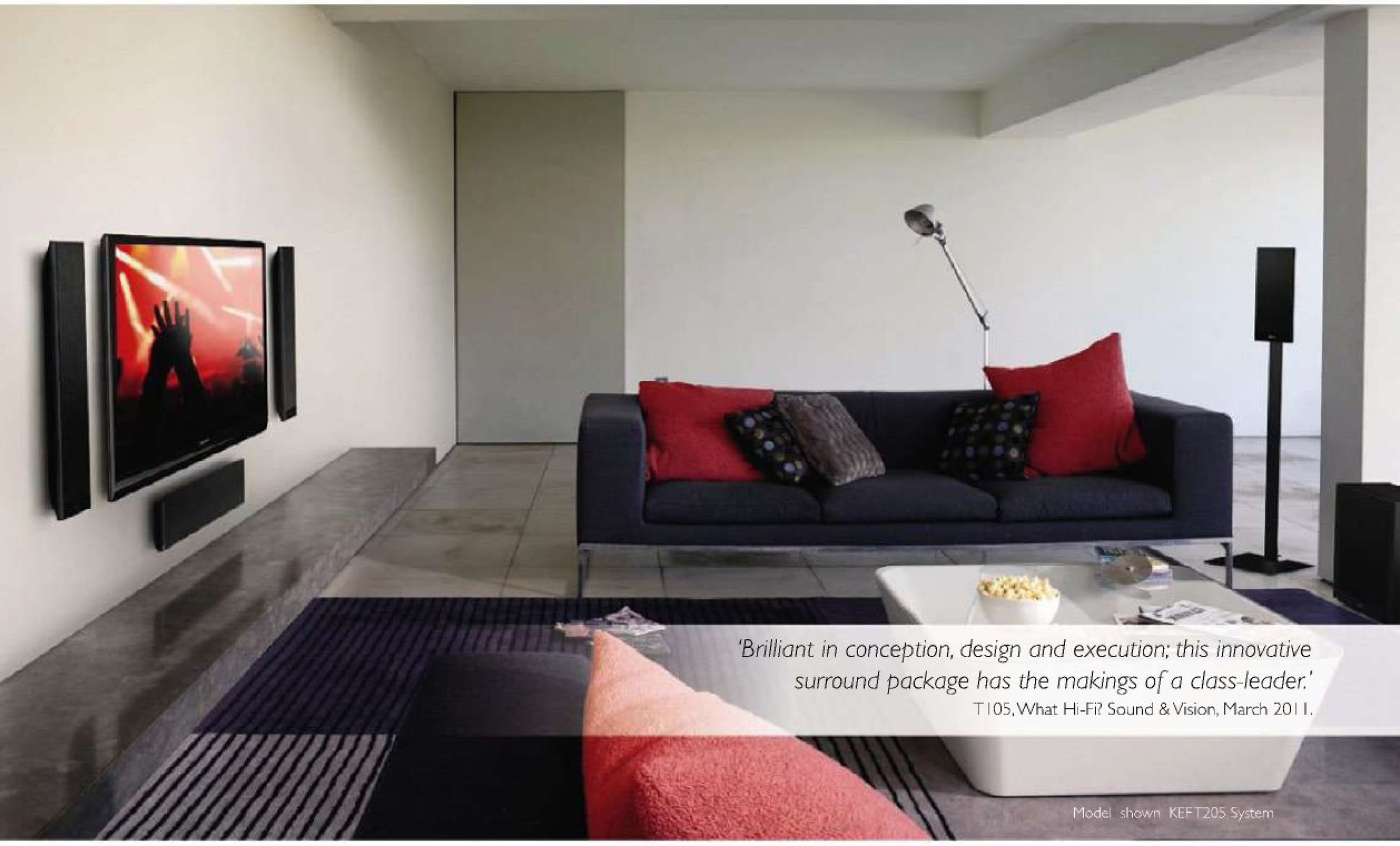
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Cambridge Audio's cheeky Minx, p76

WELCOME



Home Cinema Choice is about choosing and using the best AV gear around, so our annual Best Buy Awards represent a chance to honour the cream of the crop. **Whether you're looking for a tremendous TV, an astounding amp or stunning speakers, this issue we'll guide you to the most impressive buys of the past 12 months!**

Meanwhile, of course, the endless parade of great new gear goes on, and some of our selection may well end up being featured in next year's Awards.

There a tremendous 85in TV from Panasonic on page 24 (we can't afford it, but we can dream); a superb amp from Anthem on page 60; cute Minx speakers from Cambridge Audio on page 76, and the long-awaited Virgin TiVo PVR on page 84.

All this, plus our unrivalled Blu-ray disc roundup and an exclusive look at Hollywood's most challenging movie restorations. It's enough to make you glad the weather's still lousy!

Chris Jenkins
Editor

TEAM HCC

Chris Jenkins: Industry veteran Chris remembers when movies came on stone tablets



Mark Craven: *HCC*'s Deputy Editor is as passionate about AV gear as he is about Jason Statham



Anton van Beek: Anton's love of cinema makes him the fount of all movie knowledge



James Waldron: Taking on our tech testing calls on James' in-depth audio engineering skills



Jill Lubetkin: Jill's magazine skills mean that even the techiest articles make perfect sense



John Rook: Art Editor John was here when amps were all silver the first time around



MENU

TIVO TIME! Virgin Media's next-gen PVR reviewed & rated p84

BULLETIN

The place for hot products, trends and technology. Starts... p7

07 E additive
Find out why ASUS's Eee Pad Transformer tablet is getting AV fans excited

08 State of the Art
High-end specialist Loewe adds a touch of glamour to TV with its new Art 46 LED

09 Panasonic swims the channels
Hands on with the brand's 22.1-channel virtual surround sound Blu-ray systems

10 Toshiba joins passive massive
New passive 3DTV on the way, plus CEVO-powered LED screens

11 Going underground
Sanctum 3D prepares to unleash stereoscopic HD thrills on Blu-ray this June

12 Echostar SlingLoads PVR
Groundbreaking set-top box marries Freesat HD PVR with SlingBox networking

19 Tech diary
Your guide to the month ahead

FEATURES

In-depth interviews and special reports. Starts... p20

20 Demo screen
Rediscover a bullet-proof case for surround sound sonics as we enter *The Matrix*

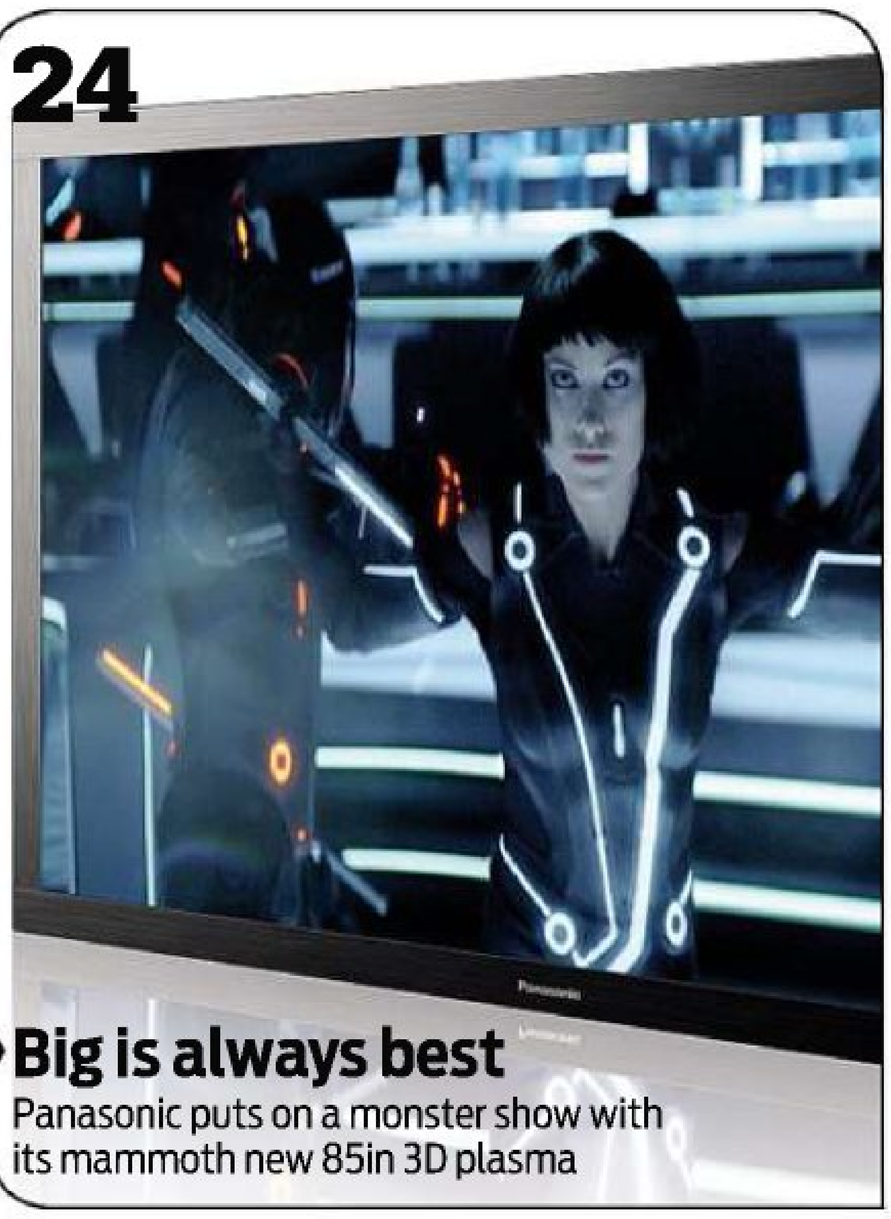
28 Certified: AV-holic!
Another *HCC* reader shares the secrets behind his AV setup

92 Finishing touches
We round up the latest AV accessories



94

Remaster class
The secrets behind the HD restoration of Hollywood classics *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *Taxi Driver*



24

COVER STORY **Big is always best**
Panasonic puts on a monster show with its mammoth new 85in 3D plasma



Best Buy Awards 2011 p31

Your guide to the UK's finest AV kit, from Blu-ray players and projectors to speaker systems and TVs

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Equipment reviewed in *Home Cinema Choice* is measured and quantified by Future Tech Labs, which for more than 15 years has set the standard for independent AV test & measurement. The findings of the Tech Labs are used to underpin the subjective opinions of our Reviews team, ensuring that you receive the best possible advice when it comes to planning your next purchase

CO-STARRING

This issue's team of expert writers are the best qualified in the business



Adam Rayner: The UK's foremost expert in extreme audio writes about bass, hi-fi and cartoons



Richard Stevenson: Industry veteran and former Editor of UK CE trade journal *ERT*



Steve May: *HCC*'s former Editor-in-Chief is one of the UK's most respected AV journos



Danny Phillips: Former editor of *What Video & High-Definition TV* and dedicated AV boffin



Martin Pipe: Technology specialist Martin co-developed *HCC*'s Tech Lab operation



Adrian Justins: Made his name as the editor of *What Video & TV* and *What Home Cinema*

Stereoscopic.com





PLAYBACK

HCC's software experts cast a critical eye over the latest DVD and Blu-ray titles. Starts... p99

100 Tron Legacy 3D/Tron: The Original Classic - 2-Disc Collection

101 The Green Hornet 3D

The King's Speech

Megamind: Double Play

Burlesque

102 The Bridge on the River Kwai: Collector's Edition

Rubber

Platoon

The Doors: 20th Anniversary SE

The Hustler

103 Taxi Driver: 35th AE

104 True Blood: The Complete Third Season

Treme: The Complete First Season

Misfits: Seasons 1 & 2

Mad Men: Season Four

Archer: The Complete Season One

105 Spartacus: Blood and Sand - The Complete First Series

Summer Wars

Confessions

Woochi: The Demon Slayer

Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives



22

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REVIEWS

With a focus on performance, these are in-depth tests you can trust... p55

56 Panasonic TX-P50GT30 — COVER STORY
THX-rated second-generation 3D plasma

60 Anthem MRX 700
High-end AVR from Canadian marque

64 JVC DLA-X7 3D
Projector offers epic bigscreen 3D thrills

67 Toshiba Stor.E TV+
Multimedia hard disk with HDMI output

68 Onkyo TX-NR609 — COVER STORY
Killer next-gen AVR with 4K-upscaling

70 Screen Excellence RM2-T
Acoustically transparent projector screen

72 Samsung BD-D6900
3D Blu-ray meets Freeview HD

76 Cambridge Audio Minx S325
Tiny 5.1 sub/sat system with plenty of bite

78 Panasonic DMP-BD75
Remember when BD decks weren't all 3D?

80 Image Audio IA 8/5/C package
Invisible speakers with hi-quality drivers

82 Onkyo BD-SP808
Old school BD deck built for high-end AV

84 Virgin Media Powered by TiVo — COVER STORY
Advanced PVR tech is back with a bang!

90 Teufel Columna 100
Great value floorstanders create big sound

PLUS...

106 How we test
Inside the *HCC Tech Lab*

109 Feedback
For tech queries or plain old moaning, there's no better venue!

114 Next Issue
We reveal Britain's best home cinemas at this year's CEDIA Awards



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BULLETIN

→News highlights **LOEWE** The German marque's latest LED TV dresses to impress **TOSHIBA** Passive 3DTV to join CEVO-powered active shutter range **ECHOSTAR** Meet the 500GB Freesat+ box with Sling Player built in **PANASONIC** Exclusive 'ears-on' with 22.1 virtual surround **SANCTUM 3D** New James Cameron-produced thriller spelunks onto Blu-ray **AND MORE!**

E additive

ASUS Eee Pad Transformer → www.asus.co.uk



It's not often you'll find us getting excited about a tablet. But then not every tablet is as exciting as ASUS's Eee Pad Transformer. Available now for around £380 (or £430 for the tablet with a nifty hinged keypad dock), this oddly titled but very tasty piece of tech caught our attention by virtue of its 10in LED backlit, 1,280 x 800 screen, Android 3.0 Honeycomb operating system, Adobe Flash 10.2 support (vital for online HD video streaming), mini HDMI output and built-in SRS Sound Technology with 5.1 audio support.

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State of the Art

Loewe Art 46 LED
www.loewe-uk.com



Eye-catching design has always been a hallmark of German high-end AV specialist Loewe. But it's outdone itself with the Art 46 LED, the latest addition to its sophisticated Art TV range. With prices starting at around £2,400, this slimline stunner marries its good looks to an impressive array of features including 200Hz picture processing, network streaming and access to online content via the new MediaHome portal. Integrated closed two-way speakers take their cues from the company's audio heritage and promise to be 'a treat for the ears'.

Partner with...

Oppo BDP-95EU
Universal Blu-ray player → £900



This universal deck is sure to deliver the kind of exceptional imagery that will really make your new HDTV shine thanks to the inclusion of Marvell's Kyoti-G2 video processor with second-generation Qdeo technology. And if that's not enough to whet your appetite, it also boasts a custom designed Rotel toroidal linear power supply, dual ES9018 SABRE 32-bit Reference DAC, 7.1-channel analogue outputs and, for when you upgrade your TV, it's 3D capable, too.
www.oppo-bluray.co.uk

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DarkChip larks



InFocus is looking to set a new benchmark for combining cutting-edge technology with a class-beating price with its latest ScreenPlay projector.

Available in the UK for around £2,500, the SP8604 is armed with dual ASIC-driven DLP DarkChip3 DMDs and promises a native 5,000:1 contrast ratio, boosted to 30,000:1 with DynamicBlack. Other features include PixelWorks DNX 10-bit video processing and a fast (4-6 speed) six-segment colour wheel. It also comes with a five-year limited warranty.
www.projectorpoint.co.uk

What the Heco?



German loudspeaker specialist, Heco, has introduced an affordable bookshelf model. The two-way bass-reflex Victa 201 comes equipped with many of the features and technology found in the company's higher-end speakers, including the use of a long-fibre paper in the construction of the bass-midrange cone to ensure the accurate reproduction of dynamics without colourisation, and a synthetic silk fabric dome tweeter for improved coupling to the air. The Victa 201 is available from Soundthinking AV Ltd., priced around £200 per pair.
www.soundthinking-store.co.uk

Samsung tunes in



Samsung recently took the plunge into the world of Freesat+ HD PVRs with the launch of the £300 SMT-S7800. This HD recorder offers up to 250hrs of SD, or 120hrs of HD recording thanks to its 500GB of storage. The built-in twin tuner lets you record one channel while watching another, and the '+' functionality means that you can timeshift live TV broadcasts. The device is also wi-fi capable and can access Freesat's on-demand services including YouTube and BBC iPlayer. Support for ITV Player will follow shortly.
www.samsung.com/uk

Panasonic swims the channels

BD home theatre systems are using virtual technology

A 22.1-channel virtual surround sound system, a feature which lets you use your own images as 'wallpaper', and Skype video communication are features of Panasonic's latest range of Blu-ray players and home theatre systems.

At an exclusive demo in the company's Bracknell headquarters, *HCC* was given a technical low-down on the range by engineers involved in development, including chief AV engineer Tetsuya Itani.

Products on show included the DMP-BDT310 3D Blu-ray player, the SC-HTB520EBK soundbar, and the SC-BTT775 home theatre system.

The DMP-BDT310, -210 and -110 players all feature a fourth-generation Uniphier video processing chip enabling them to handle 2D-to-3D conversion. We've already reviewed the DMP-BDT310 and raved about it (see *HCC* #194) but welcomed the chance to talk tech with 'Tony' Itani. Interestingly,



Tetsuya 'Tony' Itani: says 2D-3D conversion is set to improve in years to come

he readily admitted the conversion effect can be improved: '2D-3D conversion is at the stage SD-to-HD upscaling was a few years ago. It has to be used conservatively or the effect can be bad.

'I can't reveal much about the black box technology used, but with the improvements in semiconductors, 10 to 15 years from now, 2D-3D conversion will be a key technology. At the moment it's at a basic stage.'

Tech enhancements

Panasonic's new line of home theatre systems includes the SC-BTT775, which features a iPod dock and the Cinema Surround Plus feature.

The brand has used Head-Related Transfer Function processing to create virtual 'vertical' sound channels, ideal for use with 3D material. While 2010 systems supported 11 channels, the 2011 models will feature a 22.1-channel sound-field, in which sound can move upwards and downwards as well as in a horizontal plane. A run-through of action scenes from *Avatar* showed the processing to be very effective.

The SC-BTT775 also features an enhanced Clear Mode Dialogue system to clarify centre-channel speech, and a newly-designed down-firing subwoofer with a parabolic port designed to reduce unwanted distortion – as we were told, the secret is 'bass, but not too much bass!'

The first of the new models will be on sale by now; look out for full reviews in *HCC* soon.



Rock around the dock: The new SC-BT775 features 22.1 virtual surround

Playlist...

Team *HCC* reveals its Playback picks of the last month

Doctor Who: The Key to Time (R2 DVD)



A feature-packed seven-disc box set of the complete 16th season sees a wild Tom Baker as the Doctor, and glam Mary Tamm as Time Lady, Romana. *CJ*

Not Going Out (Dave)



My Virgin TiVo box reminded me of the existence of this underrated old-school BBC sitcom. Am now addicted. *MC*

RED (R2 DVD)



CIA agents in retirement are still shooting from the hip and the lip in this comedy that's as undemanding as a cuppa tea and a sit down. *JL*

Keeping Mum (FilmFour)



Broccoli! A very 'British' quirky comedy, Maggie Smith delivers as a dark Mary Poppins. *JR*

Warlock (R2 DVD)



A long overdue DVD release for this classic '80s fantasy horror. Sadly there are no extras, but at least this good-looking UK disc is in widescreen – unlike the US version! *AvB*

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Talkback

Team *HCC* reveals its thoughts about the home cinema market



At its European launch, Toshiba ran through a gamut of hi-tech processing that should make its new TVs forces to be reckoned with. That said, I won't be getting over excited by Personal TV. Like Panasonic's Blu-ray player technology that lets you soften 3D image near the edge of your screen, it's one of those ideas that sounds interesting, but will probably not get much use. Besides which, I can foresee immediate difficulties with the facial recognition system if you live with your identical twin...



It's often felt as if Toshiba has been struggling to keep pace with the rest of the AV industry, following the collapse of HD DVD a few years ago. So it's great to see the company finally taking the initiative with what looks set to be some very impressive TV technology at the heart of its forthcoming active shutter 3D screen releases.
It's just a shame that the spectacular ZL screen isn't scheduled for these shores. There's still a sizeable gap in the high-end TV market after Pioneer left and, while it's never a sure thing, the ZL could well have been a contender for the role.

Toshiba joins passive massive

Latest VL series to flank CEVO Engine active shutter screens

Toshiba has announced its first ever 3DTV using passive display technology, joining LG and Philips in offering buyers both active and passive technology 3D sets.

The edge-LED lit VL series will come in 42in and 47in sizes, bundled with four pairs of RealD glasses. The panel is sourced from LG Display.

The VL series slots into Toshiba's expanded range of bigscreen TVs that will begin to appear in the UK this summer. At the top are the long-awaited WL and YL CEVO-powered sets, (available at 42in, 46in and 55in) which use a powerful, multi-core processing platform similar to the PlayStation 3's Cell processor.

Inside, these active shutter 3D TVs are dripping with tech, including CEVO-powered 2D-to-3D conversion and Toshiba's 3D Resolution+ and NetResolution+ imaging.





Toshiba's Sascha Lange says CEVO power gives the brand a headstart in glasses-free 3DTV technology

The sets use rear-mounted, rather than edge-mounted, LEDs to illuminate the panel in a technology Tosh dubs PRO-LED 32. This equates to 32 clusters of individually controllable LEDs and promises improved contrast performance.

CEVO technology will also form the backbone of Toshiba's as yet unspecified glasses-free 3DTV, which Toshiba claims will be onsale in the UK before March 2012.

Other features shared by the VL, WL and YL ranges include access to the Toshiba Places Smart TV portal, and Personal TV, a facial recognition technology that allows up to four family members to store their own preferences (channel lists, volume and picture settings, etc) and brings them up by simply standing in front of the TV.

Zed's dead

At Toshiba's pan-European launch *HCC* was also shown Toshiba's 55in ZL active shutter 3D screen. Somewhat disappointingly, though, the flagship set, which has 512 individually controllable clusters of rear-mounted LEDs, a low-slung soundbar and an integrated 500GB HDD, won't be coming to the UK, following conversations between Toshiba and UK retailers. Sigh.

Coming soon: Toshiba's VL series passive 3DTV will ship this summer

Lives unravelled



Mark Romanek's critically acclaimed adaptation of Kazuo Ishiguro's poignant science-fiction novel *Never Let Me Go* makes its debut on Blu-ray and DVD in the UK on June 27, priced around £25 and £20 respectively. The film stars Keira Knightley, Carey Mulligan and Andrew Garfield, and arrives on Blu-ray and DVD accompanied by a 30-minute *The Secrets of Never Let Me Go* documentary, a gallery of Romanek's on-set photography, the trailer and a gallery of fake posters and graphics created for the film.
www.fox.co.uk

Nerds of a feather



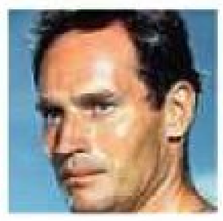
Simon Pegg and Nick Frost are serving up an out-of-this-world home cinema experience with the DVD and Blu-ray release of the sci-fi comedy *Paul* on June 13. Available as a two-disc DVD, Blu-ray: Triple Play or Limited Edition Blu-ray steelbook, this slice of geek heaven arrives as a new extended cut alongside enough extras to fill a warehouse in Area 51, including an audio commentary, bloopers, *The Evolution of Paul* visual effects featurette and *Between the Lightning Strikes: The Making of Paul* documentary.
www.universalpictures.co.uk

Keep talking, Baby



You'll soon be able to listen to Al Pacino saying hello to his 'little friend' in glorious DTS-HD MA 7.1 following the news that Universal Pictures will be bringing Brian De Palma's *Scarface* to Blu-ray in the UK on September 5. In addition to the newly restored picture and upgraded audio, the disc will feature plenty of extras, including the new *Scarface Phenomenon* documentary, deleted scenes and two U-Control modes – a Scarface Scoreboard that keeps track of swearing and bullets fired, and a PiP mode containing interviews.
www.universalpictures.co.uk

Hip, hip Hur-ray!



Early details about the 50th anniversary Blu-ray edition of *Ben-Hur* have started emerging from Warner Bros. in the US. Due for release later this year, the film has reportedly been restored from 6k scans of the original 65mm camera negatives for its hi-def debut. It will be accompanied by all of the extra features from the earlier Collector's Edition DVD (including the 1925 silent version of the story) plus a brand-new documentary entitled *Charlton Heston 7 Ben-Hur: A Personal Journey*, which includes home movie footage shot inside the Colosseum set by the late actor's wife.

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Going underground

Sanctum 3D → Universal Pictures → All-region BD

Having taken you to the furthest reaches of space with his 3D sci-fi epic *Avatar*, James Cameron is now turning his attention into the depths of the Earth, acting as producer on the 3D cave-diving thriller *Sanctum 3D*. One of the few movies doing the rounds to have been entirely conceived and shot in 3D, this subterranean action-adventure will be available from June 13 as either a traditional single-disc 2D Blu-ray, or as a double-pack also including a full HD 3D platter. Extras include commentaries, deleted scenes and the three-part *Sanctum: The Real Story* documentary.

Storekeeper.com

Premiere

HCC's guide to what's happening in the world of TV and films...

Casting (Re)call

Breaking Bad star Bryan Cranston has reportedly joined the cast of Len Wiseman's *Total Recall* remake. He'll be starring as the villainous Vilos Cohaagen opposite Colin Farrell in the sci-fi flick, which appears to have abandoned Mars all together for an Earth-based dystopia.

'Most excellent!'



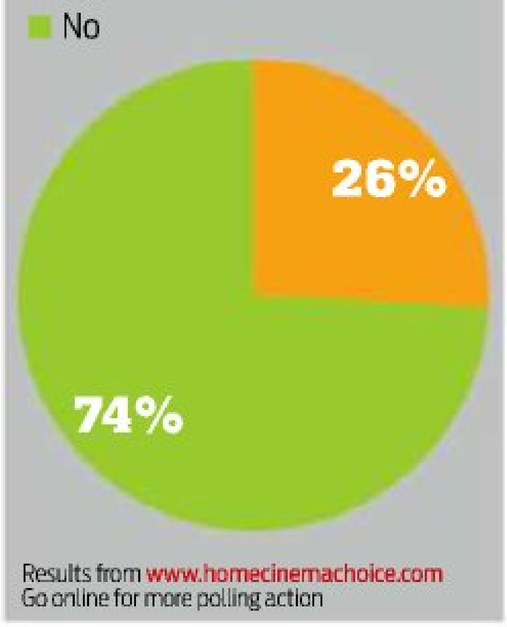
Bill S Preston and Ted Theodore Logan are about to embark on yet another excellent adventure! Keanu Reeves recently told MTV that he believes the writers 'are about six weeks away from a draft'. He also revealed that the plot deals with why the song Bill and Ted wrote to save the world in ...*Bogus Journey* hasn't worked.

Let's twist again

M Night Shyamalan has already persuaded Jaden Smith and his dad Will to sign up to his next film, a sci-fi flick about a young boy exploring an abandoned Earth and trying to save his estranged father after their ship crashes.

We asked...

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EchoStar SlingLoads its PVR

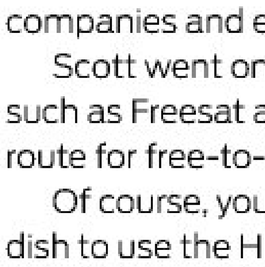
Freesat HD TV recorder can 'sling' media to your internet location

Satellite receiver and STB manufacturer EchoStar may not be a name you'd associate with a product as ground-breaking as the Sony Walkman or the Apple iPod; but that's what the company reckons it has in its HDS-600RS digital television recorder.

At the London launch, EchoStar's VP sales and marketing, Rick Smith, presented the set-top box as 'a product to put you in complete control of your entertainment experience'.

The HDS-600RS combines an HD PVR, a Freesat receiver and SlingBox networking capability. It has a 500Gb hard drive with the capacity to store 300hrs recording time in SD or 100hrs in HD. It can receive around 150 free-to-air channels via a Freesat dish, and can 'sling' live or recorded programmes to anywhere you can access an internet connection. The box features infra-red remote control, HDMI and S/PDIF connections for interfacing to your existing equipment, twin DVB-S2 tuners, a Smart Card reader, USB 2.0 port, dual Scarts, stereo audio outputs, dual RF inputs and a 10/100 Ethernet port. Functions include one-touch recording, Pause live TV, series link, upscaling from 576i to 720p and 1080i, and an HD Electronic Programme Guide. Connected TV apps include BBC iPlayer (with ITVPlayer to be added soon).

Most novel, though, is the SlingPlayer function. Using a PC or Macintosh and the SlingPlayer software, owners can watch media recorded on their HDS-600RS from anywhere they can log on to their account via the internet. To access the system via an iPhone, iPad, Android or Blackberry, an app costing £19.99 is needed. Programmes can be 'slung' in standard def only, but EchoStar's engineers tell us there's no reason why the system could not be updated to support HD, given a fast enough broadband connection.



The HDS-600RS is designed to give total control, according to Echostar's VP, Rick Smith

The Freesat features allow access to the 150 free channels available from the non-profit joint venture between the BBC and ITV. Speaking at the HDS-600RS launch, Freesat MD Emma Scott said: 'The desire of customers to not pay a subscription remains central to everything we do. This is the first step to uniting with innovative companies and evolve the TV industry.'

Scott went on to speak about how companies such as Freesat and EchoStar are 'treading a new route for free-to-air television'.

Of course, you need a Freesat-compatible dish to use the HDS-600RS as it does not have a Freeview terrestrial tuner.

The Echostar HDS-600Rs is available now, priced at £350 from sources including Amazon and John Lewis.



Slinger: Echostar's new PVR

Handmade hi-fi



Anthem AV Solutions has been appointed UK distributor for the US 'perfect invisible sound' specialist Live-Wall. Its first product is the LW1218, which the manufacturer claims functions more like traditional high-end in-wall speakers while buried under plaster, paint or wallpaper. Priced at about £700 each, the speakers can be installed nearly anywhere due to a 160° dispersion pattern. They measure 30.5 x 45.5 x 7.3cm and incorporate a 2in voice coil driven by an oversized neodymium motor.
www.anthemavs.co.uk

Get Smart (B1)



HDI Dune has unveiled its flagship high-definition network media player, the HD Smart B1. Priced around £250 and distributed in the UK by Digital Audio Distribution, the deck is described as 'an all-in-one, full HD video playback solution' combining a Sigma Designs' 8642 processor-powered media player with full network support (UPnP, SMB, NFS) and a built-in Blu-ray player. It also features a rich set of AV connections, bitstreams Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio and even offers RealD 3D compatibility.
www.dadaudio.co.uk

More Tosh tech



CEVO-powered TVs aren't the only things on Toshiba's mind this month. The tech giant also introduced two standalone Blu-ray players to the UK market, the BDX1200 and the BDX3200 (pictured). The latter sees the company venturing further into the third dimension with 'next generation' 3D Blu-ray playback, plus REGZA-LINK technology, while the former is a Profile 2.0 entry-level model.

Both decks also feature support for MKV, DivX, MP3 and JPEG file formats. Prices were TBC at the time of going to press.
www.toshiba.co.uk

News x10

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



1 Keep it civil

The war of words between Samsung and LG over 3DTV technology shows no signs of slowing down any time soon, with reports claiming that Kim Hyun-suk, vice president of Samsung's digital media business, called LG's developers 'really stupid shits' in a recent media briefing! LG described the insult as 'disappointing and unacceptable' and is now considering taking legal action.

2 Immersive yourself

Panasonic has announced that it has created a new standard for 3D glasses that can work across televisions, projectors and 3D cinemas. Called M-3DI, the brand is hoping that the new tech 'will let consumers enjoy the immersive 3D experience across all types of compatible 3D displays, as well as at movie theatres with a single pair of 3D active-shutter eyewear.'

3 Prime Focus feels the Force

George Lucas has revealed that Prime Focus is the company working with himself and Industrial Light & Magic on converting the *Star Wars* films into 3D. If the name sounds somewhat familiar, maybe it's thanks to the fuss that surrounded the rather memorable (for the wrong reasons) *Clash of the Titans* 3D conversion it produced last year.

4 The human stain...

Purpose-built home cinema seating supplier FrontRow has introduced a comprehensive five-year warranty on all purchases of its products for domestic use. It claims the 'no-quibble warranty' will cover everything from food and drink stains to accidental rips, burns and pet-related damage.

5 Onkyo supports Spotify

Onkyo has become the world's first consumer electronics brand to offer direct access to the popular internet music service Spotify through its home cinema receivers. The service is available now on the £500 TX-NR609, and Onkyo will be introducing other Spotify-ready products in the near future.

6 Director up in arms

The Hangover director, Todd Philips, has hit out at film studios for releasing so-called 'Unrated' versions of his movie on DVD and Blu-ray. 'Really all it is, is about seven minutes of footage that you cut out of the movie for a reason. It is entirely against DGA (Director's Guild of America) rules because it's not your cut,' stated the irate filmmaker.

7 Get permission

Hi-fi manufacturer Brennan has had the advertising of its JB7 Music Player pulled because the Advertising Standards Agency feels the ads incite users to commit piracy. This is because they stated you could copy music on to the device, but not that you need permission from the copyright holder to do so.

8 YouView list

Troubled subs-free TV project, YouView, has announced a list of 29 content providers that are working with it to help shape its internet-connected service. These include: Blinkbox, Blinkx, BSkyB, Film4OD, Golant Media Ventures, Guardian News & Media, IndieMoviesOnline, LOVEFiLM, Pushbutton, Radioplayer, Stream UK, STV, Travel Channel, Tvinci, UTV and woomi.

9 Streamsters

Samsung has launched a 3D video streaming service in South Korea in partnership with DreamWorks. The on-demand media (currently limited to trailers, music videos and educational content, but with films coming later in the year) is accessible via the 3D application on Samsung's Smart TV platform and will eventually be rolled out globally.

10 It's Blu-ray, not butter

A neurological study undertaken by Mindlab International on behalf of the BDA, that involved hooking participants up to monitoring equipment while they watched the same film clips on DVD, Blu-ray and Blu-ray 3D has found that 12 per cent of subjects were more attentive when watching the latter format than regular Blu-ray, and 17 per cent more attentive when watching a Blu-ray than when watching a DVD. Emotional response also increased by 8 per cent when watching 3D Blu-ray over the same content on DVD.



Web chat

A recent column about copy protection raised plenty of ire on the *HCC* website...



Down with DRM

'DRM doesn't work. It only makes it difficult for the people who work with the system to do what they want. For example, I can't play a Blu-ray on my PC because my monitor doesn't have DHCP, even though I have no intention of copying it. Also, distributors use DRM to place additional restrictions that don't exist with physical forms (try selling a DRM-ed song you no longer want on eBay). I'm not saying there isn't an issue with illegal filesharing, just that it is not as black-and-white as articles like this make out.'

Limited by region

'The studios need to stop putting barriers in the way. I'd love to buy the newly released (in the USA) Blu-ray edition of *The Fighter*. However it's region-locked, so I'm forced to wait until its UK release in June or 'steal' a copy from the internet. Piracy can be easier than owning a legitimate copy'.

Art not commerce

'There is now more, and better, music available now than there has ever been... the arrival of the internet has rendered much of what the music industry does irrelevant, as music effectively now markets and distributes itself. Which begs the question: what do we actually need the music industry for? The same question is now being asked of the movies, and they'd better adapt to the new reality or go the same way. I for one, though, won't shed any tears if the word "industry" is never again appended to the art forms that I enjoy.'

Target uploaders

'Trying to catch the downloaders will be nigh on impossible, instead it should be a priority to try and catch the uploaders and seeders. Take away the supply.'

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POINT OF VIEW

Richard Stevenson can't see the point of paying top dollar to pack servers full of movies and music. The quality sucks and it's far cheaper to rent

Media servers are a useless passing fad. I know, I have spent the last two months setting one up only to discover it is utterly pointless. The server concept has always appealed to my intrinsically gadget-obsessed bloke side but, until recently, it was all so damn complicated. Then Apple's AirPlay came into my life like a box of chocolates from Steve Jobs. But as Forrest Gump once said, 'you never know what you are going to get'.

Apple's Airplay came on Denon's AVR-3311 review unit and I was smitten by its plain chocolate simplicity and caramel smoothness. The technology is not new, but Apple TV does what it promises without having to configure your DNS server Big-MAC IP address thingy or go through Windows' home sharing fiasco only to discover nothing works anyway. Everything on my iTunes library was available on the Denon. Cool.

The Denon went back, but my sweet tooth demanded just one more cherry cup. I bought a second-generation Apple TV. Equally easy to set up and blessed with an interface slicker than a well-oiled weasel. Plugged straight into an AVR over HDMI, it is a paragon of user-friendliness underpinned by a style that it seems only Apple can achieve. The menus, scrolling cover artwork and responsiveness are all wow-factor impressive. And at £89 from Amazon, Apple TV is the equivalent of Belgian pralines for the price of a box of Quality Street.

I re-built an old PC with Raid-1 mirrored 2TB drives, installed iTunes and set about creating a serious media server library, which is when the sweet began turning sour. Ripping 800 CDs in Apple Lossless alone took weeks before I started on the movie collection. This is a lot more awkward, requiring third party software such as iSkysoft or Clone2go for DVDs and I used Pavtube for ripping Blu-rays to MP4. Then you need to spend time faffing about importing the cover artwork and organising your library. When the 2TB drive began flagging capacity warnings I still had half my DVDs on the shelf.

Worse still, the Jobs 'massive' have ensured that Gen 2 Apple TV only supports 720p video and vanilla Dolby Digital and DTS 5.1 sound, not 1080p full HD or any of the HD audio formats. You will also lose most of the extras depending on how the menus are structured on the original disc. Ripping music in Apple Lossless wasn't a total success either. Apple TV's AirPlay to PCM electronics and cheapo HDMI and Toslink ports are, not surprisingly, not of comparable quality to the £4,000 Denon A1UD universal disc spinner.

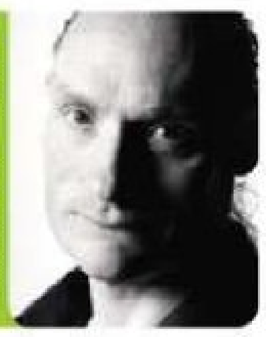
Rent boy

I have created a monster! A super-convenient beast of a server stuffed full of content that doesn't look, sound or perform anything like as good as the original discs. Ironically I have so little free time to sit and watch movies or listen to music that, when I do, I damn well want the absolute best performance my system will offer. And I can get grab a disc from the shelf for that.

'Ah, but what of download content?' I hear you cry. Well the streamed rental model, such as LOVEFiLM and Apple TV when it offers 1080p, is going to be absolutely dominant in the future. Paying a few quid to watch a film once makes a lot more sense than paying three or four times as much to buy it and subsequently clog up your hard drives or shelves. And to see it again renting it is still cheaper. If you really insist on building your own content library, then keep it in the cloud so you can access it wherever and whenever you like.

Whichever way you look at it, media servers are redundant. After all my hard work ripping discs, I have actually ended up with the hard toffees and coffee crèmes. And they always get left behind ●

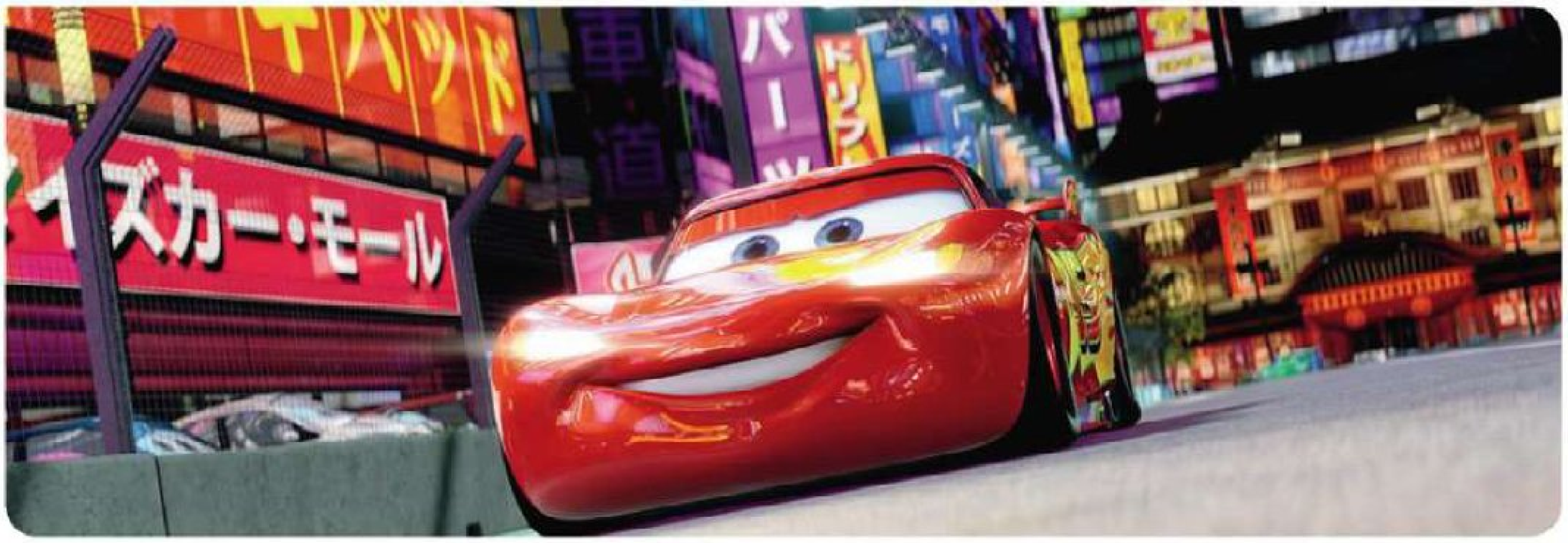
Have you moved from disc to disc-less home cinema? Let us know by e-mailing hcc@futurenet.com



Richard Stevenson was the man in black in the Milk Tray ad, until a back injury on a roof put paid to that. He's always missed the chocolate, though

ILLUSTRATION: BY TEKURA MAEVA

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DVD ADDICT

The Beek despairs at the thought of watching Hollywood sequels all year. He's glad he's squirrelled away his favourite Blu-rays to watch at home

While the cinema chains regale us with tales of falling tickets sales, the Hollywood studios have come up with a sure-fire plan for parting us with our cash – and that's simply to give us more of what we want. To this end, 2011 is set to break the existing record for the largest number of bigscreen sequels arriving in a single year, with a whopping 27 – breaking the previous record of 23 set in 2003. Now, we aren't talking about the sort of rubbish you find heading straight to DVD (such as a new *Lost Boys* sequel). These are all high profile sequels such as *Kung Fu Panda 2, Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* and *The Hangover: Part II*.

Numbers game

And it's not just a plethora of number twos either – although I have a sneaking suspicion plenty of them will be classed as such by most critics. Before the year is out, Hollywood will not only have served up plenty of part threes (*Paranormal Activity 3* and *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*), but also a dollop of part fours (*Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* and *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*), a smattering of part fives (*Fast & Furious Five* and *Final Destination 5*), the odd part seven (*Rise of the Planet of the Apes*) and even a part eight (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part 2*). And that's only scratching the surface.

All of which is surely good news? Hollywood is generously giving us more of what it knows we want than ever before. So if you liked [insert generic action blockbuster title here], then you're guaranteed to be dying to watch [generic action blockbuster] Part 2. Not forgetting Parts 3, 4, 5 and so on. And it's not as if the Hollywood studios are just providing sequels to recent hits either.

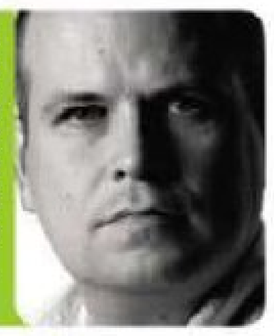
This year will also see a new outings for *The Muppets* (last seen at cinemas in 1999) and even the return of *Johnny English* (2003). Who says Hollywood is creatively bankrupt?

I think 'complete and utter despair' would be a suitable phrase to describe the swell of emotion I get every time I scan the list of this year's Hollywood films. You see, while I don't go out to the cinema anywhere near as often as I used to – thanks in large part to the combination of ticket prices and the time and effort I've put into building a home cinema system – I do still believe that nothing quite beats the thrill of watching a film in a packed cinema on a mammoth screen, surrounded by a rapt and attentive audience.

But as with Hollywood and its sequels, it looks as if I'll be setting my own record this year; for the smallest number of films watched at a cinema. And those few times I do go certainly won't be to catch the likes of *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn, Part One* or *Cars 2* (although I might make an exception for the brilliantly titled *Piranha 3DD*); it'll probably be in the hope of catching something potentially far more interesting in one of the BFI's seasons of films on the Southbank or – best of all – some horror treats at this year's FrightFest.

But there is a silver lining to this particular cloud. With next to nothing tempting me down to my local multiplex this year, I'll be able to spend much more time with my home cinema system. And, between the extensive library of Blu-rays I've been steadily building and those slated for release this year (including *The Lord of the Rings: The Motion Picture Trilogy – Extended Edition, Quatermass and the Pit, Citizen Kane, Ben-Hur*, and the *Star Wars* saga) there's no chance of me running out of films I really want to watch ●

Is Hollywood afraid of taking a risk with new ideas? Let us know: email hcc@futurenet.com



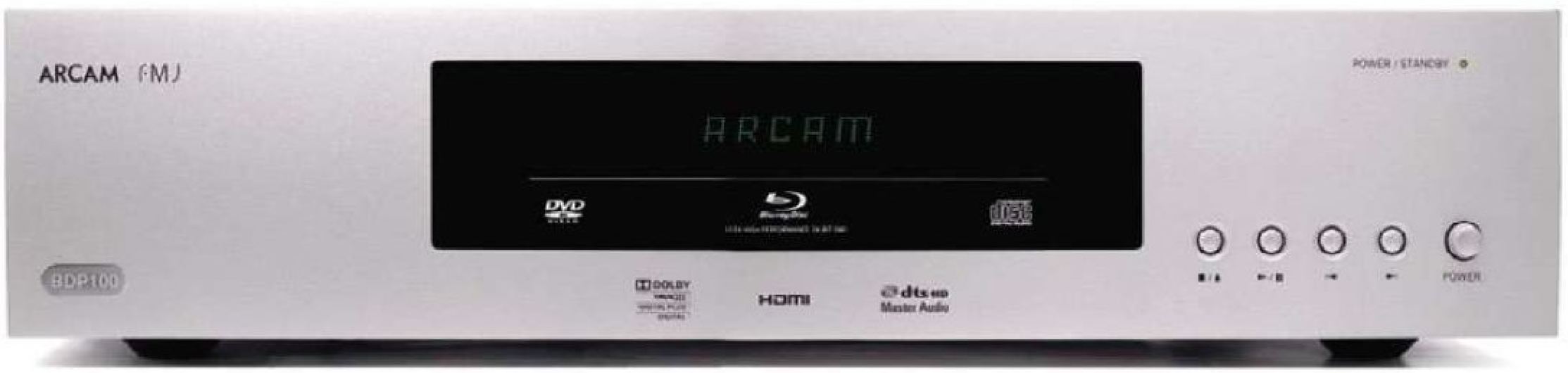
Anton van Beek is unique, like Robocop. We tried to clone him, but the results were horrific to say the least...

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TECH TANTRUM

Barry Fox asks whether cheaper deals in mobile broadband could make streaming movies to smartphones and tablets more attractive

Internet TV can work fine on a portable device such as a smartphone or tablet, with memory buffering keeping the pictures smooth even when the signal is temporarily lost. There is a wide choice of video sites, such as Sky News and YouTube, and receiving internet radio programmes poses no problems either.

But accessing the internet from a mobile to download movies via a broadband data connection has, until recently, been horribly expensive. Since last December, though, network operator Three has been offering 'all-you-can-eat' mobile broadband data for between £15 and £25 a month – but can it be kept up?

Three pledges unlimited data day and night, all day, every day, for no extra charge. They say: 'There is no smallprint download limit to the One Plan all-you-can-eat data. Customers are welcome to use their device as they wish to download, stream and generally make the most of the internet on the go.'

But can Three afford to give away so much data, and can the network stand the load? Kevin Russell, Three's CEO, thinks it can.

'I am comfortable with supporting all-you-can-eat data,' he assured. 'We are out to gain market share. It's not a promotion. We think it is sustainable. We are taking away the threat of the £1,000 bill.'

Other experts cast doubt on this, with one analyst saying, 'I will be surprised if Three can carry on. I don't think mobile broadband can be a replacement for fixed broadband. Three will not have the capacity. They will either have to limit or choke services, or buy spectrum. It matters most at peak times such as early evenings.'

So Three's offer of unlimited data may have a sell-by date, because demand for data may soon outstrip the radio spectrum that Three is licensed to use. All eyes are now on the other UK operators, Vodafone, O2 and Everything Everywhere (Orange and T-Mobile). Will they compete with Three by offering similar unlimited data deals, wait for the company to end the offer, or face complaints over slow speeds caused by congestion?

Cinema in your pocket

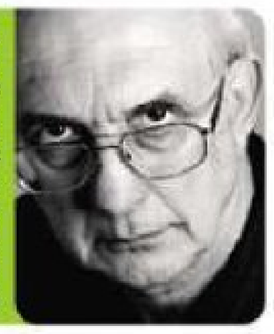
Meanwhile, other portable device manufacturers have seen the attractions of the movies-on-the-move market – particularly for the younger audience. HTC has unveiled a 'multimedia superphone', the Sensation, which features the HTC Watch video service. 'Smartphones have evolved into pocket-sized entertainment centres that enable people to take their favourite content with them wherever they go,' said Peter Chou, CEO of HTC Corporation.

The HTC Sensation's 4.3in qHD display delivers high-resolution widescreen viewing, and the 1.2Ghz dual-core Qualcomm Snapdragon processor enables fast video performance. The HTC Sensation also shoots full HD video in 1080p resolution, with full stereo sound, at up to 30 frames per second, and you can crop clips with the Video Trimmer tool.

The HTC Watch feature uses progressive download technology making it possible to watch videos without waiting for a huge file to finish downloading, and offers the choice of renting or buying videos on up to five different HTC devices.

With its HDMI output, the Sensation could even be connected to your home cinema system, so is this the future of media playback? The question is whether mobile broadband services can afford to keep up with increased demand for movies on the move. Only time will tell

Are you addicted to your smartphone for entertainment? Let us know: email hcc@futurenet.com



Barry Fox has a forensic understanding of the strength and weaknesses of technology, second only to his love of Californian Jazz radio stations

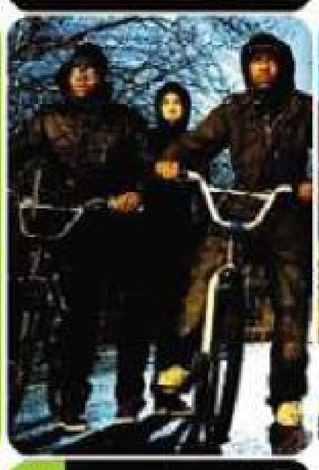
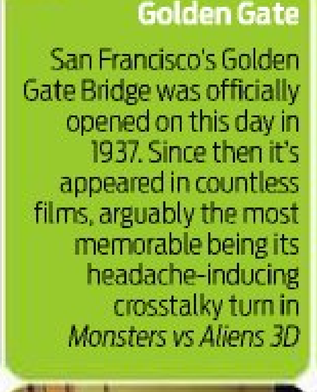
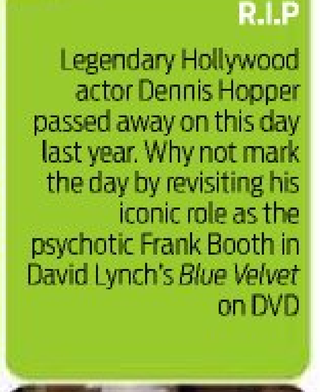
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Tech diary

The world of AV and film changes fast. **Our calendar** ensures you don't miss out



The Way Back: Get out of jail: do not pass Go, do not collect £200

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
				6 **Hannah** *Atonement* director, Joe Wright, serves up this intriguing action-thriller about a 16-year-old girl raised by her father to be the perfect assassin. At cinemas across the UK from today www.universalpictures.co.uk		
9 **The Way Back** Today sees the DVD and BD release of this WWII drama starring Ed Harris and Colin Farrell. Director Peter Weir weaves the tale of a group of escapees from a Siberian Gulag. www.entertainmentone.co.uk				13 **Attack the Block** The inner city takes on outer space in this alien invasion comedy from comedian-turned-director, Joe Cornish. Expect great things when it hits UK cinemas this Friday www.optimumreleasing.com		
16 **Spartacus: Blood and Sand** The complete first series of this saucy swords 'n' sandals series finally makes its DVD and BD debut in the UK today. Read our review in this issue's Playback section www.anchorbay.co.uk		18 **Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides** Capt Jack Sparrow returns to UK cinemas from today - and he's in 3D! Penelope Cruz and Ian McShane join Johnny Depp for a the swashbuckling tale www.disney.co.uk	19 **High End 2011** Whether it's warmly glowing tubes or coolly calculating signal processors, this popular trade fair promises to set the tone for high-end AV in Europe. Runs from today until May 22 at the MOC in Munich www.highendsociety.de			22 **Golden Palme** Following 11 days of screening and premieres, the Cannes Film Festival draws to a close today with the jury handing out the awards, including the treasured 24-carat gold Palme d'Or www.festival-cannes.com
		25 **Public access** The first public television station in the US, KUHT, began broadcasting from the University of Houston campus on this day in 1953	26 **PALM & Install China** Beijing's China Int'l Exhibition Centre opens its doors today for this four-day trade event for installers, manufacturers and architects operating in the Asia market www.install-online.com/china	27 **The Hangover: Part II** Director Todd Phillips reunites actors Bradley Cooper, Ed Helms, Zach Galifianakis, Justin Bartha and Ken Jeong for this Bangkok-based sequel to the hit 2009 comedy. Opens at UK cinemas today www.warnerbros.co.uk	28 **Golden Gate** San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge was officially opened on this day in 1937. Since then it's appeared in countless films, arguably the most memorable being its headache-inducing crosstalky turn in *Monsters vs Aliens 3D*	29 **R.I.P** Legendary Hollywood actor Dennis Hopper passed away on this day last year. Why not mark the day by revisiting his iconic role as the psychotic Frank Booth in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* on DVD
		1 **X-Men: First Class** After *Kick-Ass*, director Matthew Vaughn moves to mainstream superheroes with this prequel to the *X-Men* films. Catch it from tomorrow at cinemas across the UK www.fox.co.uk	2 ***HCC* #196** Your favourite home cinema magazine hits the stands this Thursday, packed to the gills with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and full-on software reviews. www.homecinemachoice.com			

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Demo screen



The Matrix makes a bullet-proof case for owning a surround sound system. Prepare to treat your ears...



The Matrix

Warner Home Video → All-region BD → £20 Approx

Time code: 101.05-111.32

One of the best ways to convince family and friends that your home cinema is worth the money is to show them a familiar scene with the improved benefits of HD visuals and authentic lossless surround sound. The infamous lobby shoot-'em-up in *The Matrix* fits the bill perfectly.

'We wanted a specific stylised approach to the destruction, to reduce those concrete pillars to apple cores,' say the film's directing duo, the Wachowski brothers. And it works, from the moment Neo (Keanu Reeves) and Trinity (Carrie Ann Moss) are set upon by an army of guards while trying to rescue Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), to the climactic helicopter-smashing-into-a-skyscraper climax, this scene is pure home cinema heaven.

The sound mix is perhaps the most impressive element. At first, bullet-fire rampages across the soundstage, interspersed with the exquisite tinkling of spent shells and the clunk-click of reloaded ammo. Then more guards pile in, one shouts 'Freeze!' and all hell breaks loose, as the Wachowskis ramp up the artillery and call in a big-beat soundtrack to underpin the glorious stuntwork.

Then there's just time to catch your breath while Neo and Trinity hotwire a lift to the rooftop, before the carnage continues. It's here where we first see Neo's yoga-infused bullet-dodging. The bullets warping from front to back of the soundstage, first on the right, then on the left, are cast-iron proof that you need a full surround system to really enjoy a movie like this. Finally, visitors to your viewing room will be left slack-jawed at the low-frequency rumble when Trinity's hi-jacked helicopter collides into a skyscraper in the scene's finale.

A word of warning, though. To get the best out of this reference-grade demo sequence you must make sure your display is calibrated correctly. The sharp BD visuals major on deep blacks and dirty greens, and there's nothing worse than watching bullet-time FX at 200Hz...

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go beyond the box.

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Big is always best

Bigscreen addict **John Archer** gives over his entire office to spend quality time with Panasonic's 85in 3D plasma

So here's my dilemma. Do I get that brand new, fully loaded Audi Q7 I've had my eye on for so long, do I book the family into a luxury villa at the Maldives Hilton for, ooh, a couple of months or so, or do I buy Panasonic's TH-85VX200 plasma screen?

Except that, of course, there isn't really any decision here at all. For unfortunately all three options I've just described – even, scarily, the 85VX200 – cost a cool £42,000 or so, meaning they're little more than pipe dreams for me and the vast majority of people reading this article.

However, when you get to the sort of status symbol price worn like a badge of honour by the 85VX200, you're not talking about a product aimed at 'normal' folk. Instead, you're talking about people like Roman Abramovich installing four 85VX200s on a yacht (we kid you not).



Dream screen: 3D at this size is truly immersive

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We know that many of you just love to indulge in the sort of home cinema fantasies represented by the 85VX200. And we also know that if you really want to get a handle on exactly where a particular AV brand is going in technological terms, you really need to check out its very biggest screens. So when the opportunity arose to get an 85VX200 delivered to my test room, it really seemed churlish to say no.

Plus, of course, having an 85VX200 at my place when the weekly 'lad's Xbox night' came around wasn't an entirely unpleasant prospect...

Long-term readers may remember that a few years ago I persuaded Panasonic to install its 103in plasma screen in my house for a bit – an installation marathon involving four people, lots of swearing/head shaking, and a crane. Thankfully, getting the 85in in was rather less of a palaver. It still needed two guys with a long-wheelbase lorry and a tail lift - and there were some concerned looks at the rather steep slope running down from my converted garage to the also inclined street below.







Handle with care: Getting the TH-85VX200 installed is definitely a two-man job



After all, once an 85in plasma screen in a flight case starts rolling downhill, neither cars nor my neighbours' houses will be much use in the way of stopping it.

Fortunately, though, after a little careful van manouvering, the huge flight case had been trundled into my test room, and the screen had been unpacked – without a crane in sight.

The relative ease of installation versus the 103in screen isn't just down to the 85VX200's smaller size. For the 85VX200 I tested came fixed to a nifty, purpose-made floor mount, complete with hydraulic lifting system. The base of this floorstand even formed part of the flight case, with the rest of the flight case just detaching from it. At no point did anyone have to lift the screen off the ground. Very clever.

Not surprisingly, the hydraulic stands (around £8K from German manufacturer MediaScreen) are apparently proving popular with people buying 85VX200s. Especially given the potential problems with trying to hang 118kg of plasma display on a typical internal wall!

It's partly, even mostly, because of it's installation difficulties that the 85VX200 ships through Panasonic's 'Professional', custom install channel rather than its consumer one.

So it you're lucky enough to be able to buy one, you need to approach your nearest custom installation firm to see if they have experience with this sort of installation, and tell them to approach UK distributor AWE Europe Ltd.

Attentive readers may have noticed that I haven't yet used the word 'TV' in this feature. Why? Because the 85VX200 isn't a TV. It has no tuners. Instead, predictably for such an expensive product shipped through non-consumer channels, you're expected to add all external sources yourself.

It's worth adding, too, that the 85VX200 doesn't go big on multimedia support, carrying no USB jacks as standard, and not supporting Panasonic's VieraConnect online TV system.

The 85VX200's most eye-catching feature – after its price and size, of course! – has to be its 3D capabilities. After all, bigger always seems better where 3D is concerned.

Also, the 85VX200's freedom from pricing concerns has allowed it to carry two promising improvements over Panasonic's consumer 3D models. First up is an ultra-high speed plasma drive engine, which Panasonic claims boosts the plasma cycle speed by up to 75 per cent. The other innovation is Motion Vector Prediction processing, designed to get the jump on motion in and out of a 3D image as well as across it, further boosting the 85VX200's 3D response time.

The main point behind all of this is to suppress the double-ghosting crosstalk noise so common with active 3D TVs. And you know what? It actually works.

The 85VX200's 3D pictures really do suffer less with crosstalk than any other full HD 3D images I've seen, allowing you to revel in the detail of the full HD 3D Blu-rays of *Avatar* and *Resident Evil: Afterlife*.

Not having a nasty 3D glitch shoved in your face every few seconds also helps to create the sense of immersion that's really 3D's point.

And the 85VX200's 3D strengths don't end there, either. The screen manages to deliver 3D with higher brightness levels and richer colour saturations than Panasonic's consumer models – possibly >

AV/CV

Product: 85in 3D plasma display from Panasonic's 'Professional' division

Positioning: Amazingly, this is the baby in the professional 3D range – there are also 103in and 152in models

Peers: None



→ Specifications

HD Ready: YES including 1080p/24
Tuner: NO this is a screen only
Component video: YES one input (rear)
HDMI/DVI: YES four, v1.4
PC input: yes one D-Sub
Resolution: 1,920 x 1,080
Sound: no speakers included
Brightness (claimed): NA
Contrast ratio (claimed): 5,000,000:1
Dimensions (off stand): 2015(w) x 1195(h) x 99(d)mm
Weight: 118kg
Also featuring: '600Hz', fast decay plasma cell technology; motion vector prediction for 3D; ultra-high speed drive mechanism; 30-bit colour processing; full colour management and white balance adjustment; endorsed by the ISF; 3D transmitter built in and one pair of 3D glasses included in the price

because the 85VX200's 'Pro' classification means it doesn't have to abide by such stringent power consumption rules.

For those of you who still doubt even the potential of 3D in the home, it's hard to see how you wouldn't be convinced after a few minutes with the 85VX200.

Happily the screen is also terrific in 2D mode. The detailing inherent to good quality HD looks even better when pumped onto a full HD 85in screen – especially when it's presented free of processing noise or any other obvious interference. Without the dimming effect of Panasonic's 3D glasses, moreover, it's even easier to appreciate just how dynamic and vibrant the 85VX200's pictures really are.

Experience suggests that standard-definition struggles to translate well onto screens bigger than 50in. But the high-grade video processor installed in the 85VX200 manages to upscale standard-definition pictures without exaggerating noise or losing a grasp on colour tones, meaning they're



Weight-lifter: This hydraulic stand from MediaScreen is a worthwhile add on

Skinny: Despite being an 85in panel, it's still only 99mm deep

really not hard to watch at all.

So is the 85VX200 perfect? Actually no. Its most aggravating/stupid problem is Panasonic's 3D glasses. Despite being second-generation affairs, their lenses are far too narrow, allowing too much light between your eyes and the lenses and making it tough to position them at the right angle between your eyes and the screen. I found myself having to either push the glasses right to the end of my nose, or permanently tilt my head down. Neither of which makes for comfortable 3D viewing. But this is where universal 3D goggles start to earn their keep.

Other issues find 50Hz pictures suffering marginal colour lag if you don't employ Panasonic's (thankfully pretty good) Intelligent Frame Creation processing engine, and a little low-level speckling in dark scenes. Though you won't often see this unless you're sat closer to the screen than you ought to be.

Finally, it seems rather mean-spirited of Panasonic to only include a single pair of 3D glasses with the 85VX200.

But despite this list of flaws and irritations, the five days I've spent with 85VX200 have arguably been the most AV fun I've ever had. Even so, I can't say I ended up entirely convinced that an 85in screen can really justify 42 grand. Still, if money's no object and a projection system just isn't practical, then the 85VX200 might just be the best £42,000 you've ever spent!



HCC VERDICT

Panasonic TH-85VX200
£42,000 Approx

Highs: Class-leading 3D and 2D hi-def images; clean standard-definition pictures
Lows: Supplying only one pair of 3D goggles seems a bit tight

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

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Certified: AV-holic!

Every issue, an **HCC reader** invites you to take a tour of their beloved home cinema setup...









DIY diva: Damon has just finished helping on a custom-build for a friend. Sounds like a handy guy to know!

Introduce yourself...
Damon Manning. I'm 41 and work for a building company.

Are you an AV-holic?
Yes, absolutely! Since I hooked up the TV to my stereo system back in the '80s, and then when I got my first DVD player.

What's in your current setup?
A Panasonic TX-P50S10B plasma screen and Panasonic DMP-BD80 Blu-ray player; Onkyo TX-SR607 receiver; Sony SCD-XE670 SACD deck; Cambridge Audio DAB300; Virgin HD V+ box and a custom-built home theatre PC connected to the amp and TV. As for audio, I run a 5.2 speaker system, all from Roth: Oli 4 floorstanders, Oli C2 centre, Oli 1 surrounds and two Oli KH2 subwoofers.

What was the last bit of kit you bought?
A horribly expensive HDMI sound card for the HTPC!

And what's next?
My next purchase will probably be to update the DAB radio.

How much have you spent on your AV habit over the years?
I think, including this little build, its around £20,000.

What does your family think of your hobby?
My girlfriend loves the setup as she's half deaf, but enjoys the rumbles from the subs! So no noise issues from her and the neighbours haven't complained yet, either.

What's your current fave disc?
My favourite Blu-ray at the moment has to be Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven*. I love the battle scenes and it gives the speakers a really good workout.

Are you excited about 3D?
To be honest I'm not sure! I just finished a custom-build for a friend who has some great kit – the Sony 60in LED 3DTV and a Sony Blu-ray deck – and we watched *Bolt* in 3D. While the 3D was very immersive and looked great, it made me feel a bit disorientated. Maybe it's just me...

Room essentials

A Work in progress
Damon's AV components are housed in this purpose-built false chimney breast

B Degree of genius
The wall-mounted Panasonic plasma is tilted at a slight angle so viewers aren't off axis

C Double dip
This brace of Roth Oli subwoofers should provide room-filling low-end grunt

D Back catalogue
There's a useful space behind the TV to store Damon's software collection

E DAB R.I.P.
Replacing this DAB radio is next on our AV-holic's agenda

Join the club

Do you want to see your home cinema system featured in the pages of *Home Cinema Choice*? If so, log on to **www.homecinemachoice.com/avholic** where you'll find all the information you need.

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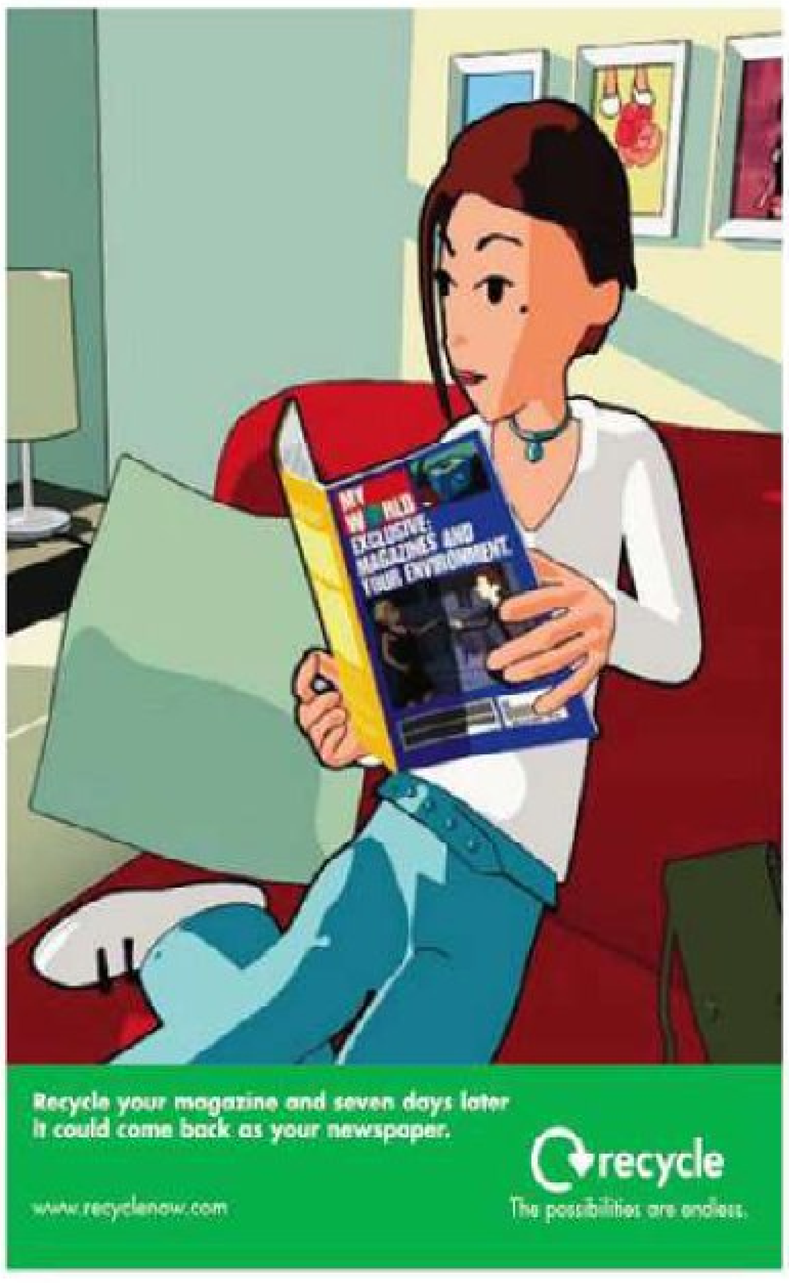
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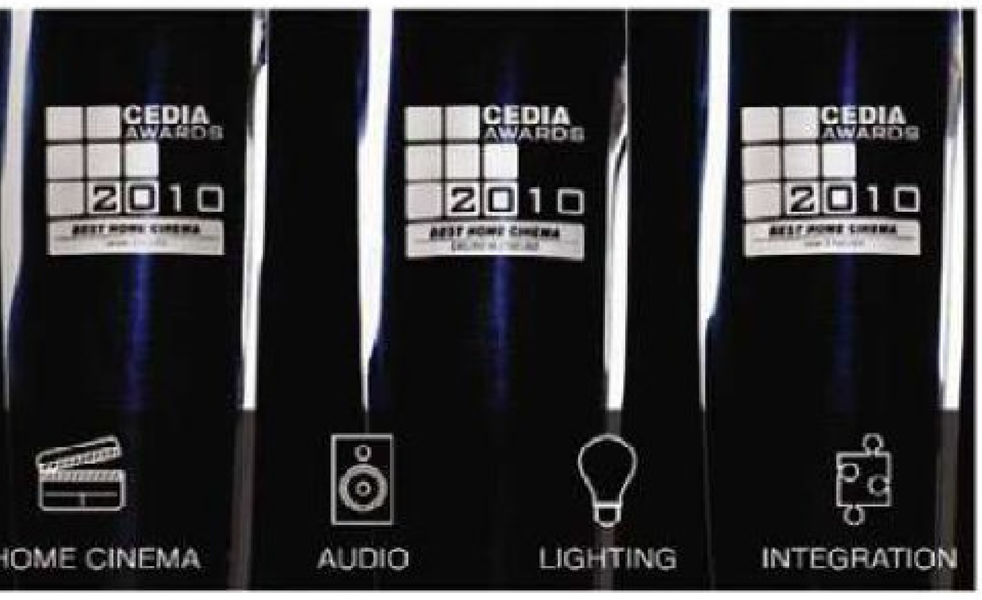




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HOME CINEMA Choice BEST BUY AWARDS 2011



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Our golden Starman makes his return, as Home Cinema Choice once again honours the finest AV hardware in the land. Over the past 12 months, our reviewers have assessed an avalanche of gear in a ceaseless search for the best players, displays, projectors, speakers, AVRs and more. What follows is the cream of that crop. Performance, value for money and innovation have all played their part. Now you can play yours. Welcome to the Home Cinema Choice Best Buy Awards, 2011...

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Sony KDL-32NX503

Winner: Best TV 37in and under
First reviewed: HCC #188



For us, home cinema begins at 32in, and Sony's KDL-NX503 is a great place to start. Decked out in a single-layer, gloss black fascia and with optional tilting stand, it cuts a sleek figure in your living room.

The features count is generous, with Sony bestowing DLNA streaming, Bravia Internet Video, a quartet of HDMI inputs, Freeview HD tuner and 100Hz processing to its entry-level NX model.

Add in the sharp, detailed pictures and excellent calibration capabilities and you've got a smallscreen winner.

Finalists...

Toshiba 32AV713

First reviewed: HCC #188

This entry-level 32-incher impressed us with its multimedia prowess and full colour management system. So much so that its absence of a Freeview HD tuner can be overlooked.



Samsung 32C580

First reviewed: HCC #188

Samsung's 32C580 packs a Freeview HD tuner, oodles of connections and solid performance into a classy, slimline bezel – and doesn't cost an arm and a leg, either.



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Panasonic TX-P50VT20

Winner: Best TV 40-50in
First reviewed: HCC #183

In the deeply competitive 40-50in category, this plasma edged out its rivals thanks to a gorgeously cinematic picture performance with both 2D and 3D alike – Panasonic's NeoPDP panel offers first-rate motion-handling and black levels, natural-looking colours and 3D images unblighted by crosstalk. Meanwhile, features such as USB recording, online portal access, DLNA networking and a well-judged THX preset complete a tasty bigscreen package.

Finalists...

Philips 46PFL9705

First reviewed: HCC #189

Philips may have been a few months behind the competition in releasing a 3DTV, but this 46in LED-lit model was worth the wait. Design, performance and features all impressed.



Sony KDL-40NX713

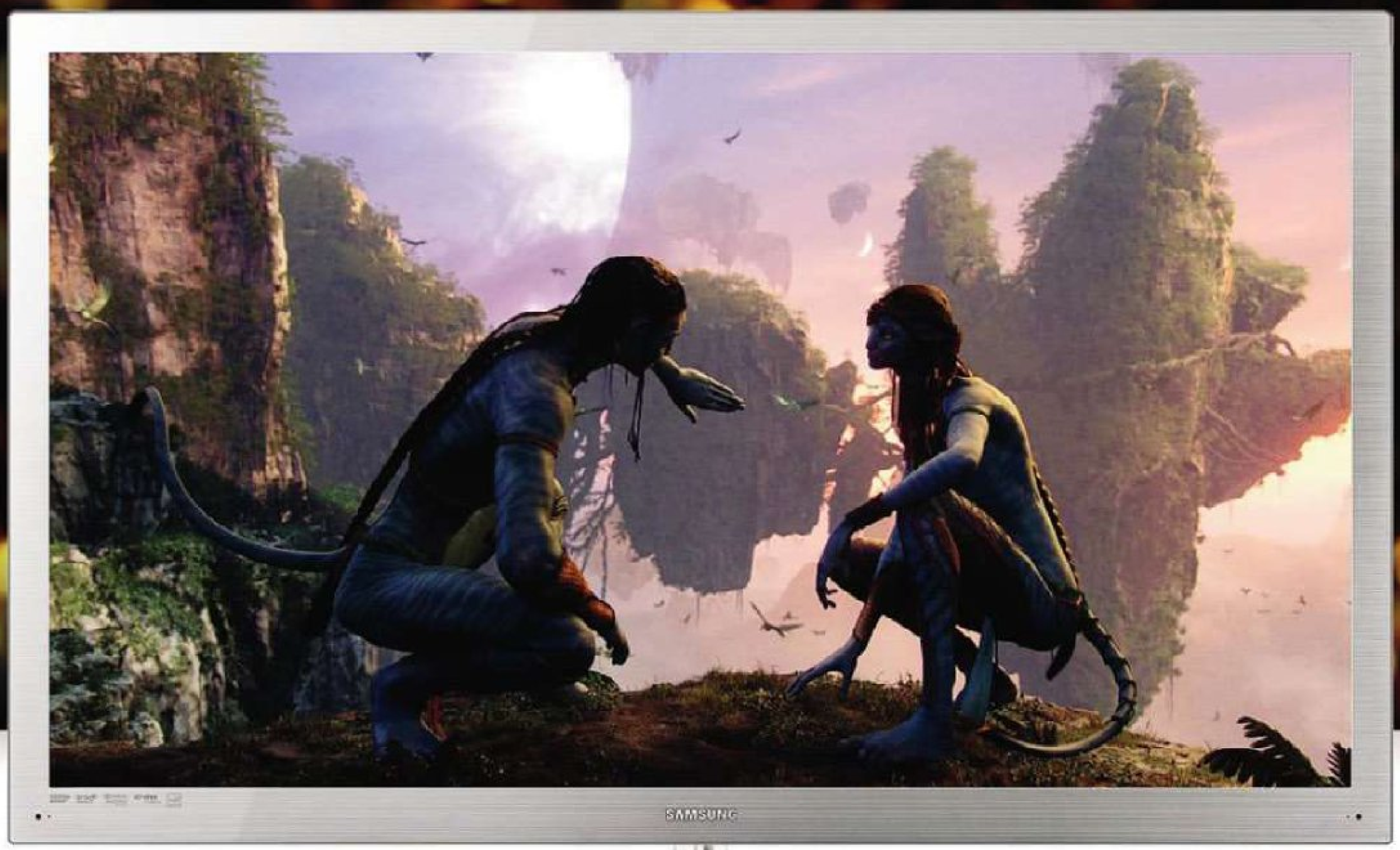
First reviewed: HCC #193

This 40in Bravia TV is Sony at the top of its game. Gorgeous styling combines with a superfluous hi-def picture, and the ability to upgrade to 3D is handy for cautious consumers.



Samsung UE55C9000

Winner: Best TV above 50in
First reviewed: HCC #185



There aren't many products that have people from around the office filing into our test room for a shufti, but Samsung's high-end 9000 series TV definitely has that siren quality – sporting an ultra-thin, aluminium bezel and touchscreen remote control, it's quite simply the best-looking set we've ever seen.

The supermodel design is backed up by an eye-opening AV performance, too. Blu-rays on this 55in screen dazzle with their clarity, contrast and colours. 'A great example of just how accomplished an LCD TV can be,' was our review verdict.

If we won the lottery we'd buy 10 of 'em.

Finalists...

Panasonic TX-P65VT20
First reviewed: HCC #186

This big brother of Panasonic's award-winning P50VT20 offers an even more compelling 3D experience and best-in-class plasma pictures. Want a 65in TV? Get this.



Philips 21:9 Cinema Platinum
First reviewed: HCC #190

The second-generation of Philips' CinemaScope TV adds 3D playback, LED backlighting, smarter design and a bigger screen size (now 58in) to an already brilliant idea.



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Panasonic DMP-BDT310

Winner: Best Blu-ray player under £350
First reviewed: HCC #194

If you're looking to add an affordable 3D deck to your system, then Panasonic's £250 DMP-BDT310 should be your first audition. This second-generation 3D Blu-ray spinner builds on the excellent AV performance of its predecessor and adds plenty of improvements, including an eye-catching slimline design, touch-free sensor, Skype functionality and zippier loading times. Our Tech Labs were also particularly impressed by the truly eco-friendly power consumption – the DMP-BDT310 uses only 7W when playing a movie, so you can feel good about your own planet while watching the human race destroy Pandora in *Avatar 3D*.

Finalists...

Philips BDP7500 Mk II
First reviewed: HCC #194

Philips' £200 BD deck is well-built, strikingly designed and great value for money. Features 7.1-channel analogue outputs, and unrestricted web access top off the gorgeous hi-def visuals.



Sony BDP-S570
First reviewed: HCC #185

With its 'Monolithic' design, intuitive GUI, built-in wi-fi, Super Audio CD playback and spot-on picture performance there's a lot to love about Sony's £160 Blu-ray deck.





Oppo BDP-83SE Nu Force

Winner: Best Blu-ray player £350 and over
First reviewed: HCC #190

American brand Nu Force has taken Oppo's BDP-83SE deck and turned it into an audiophile's dream. Sabre DACs, new circuitry in the power supply and cleaner signal paths are some of the tweaks that make its music performance exemplary. On top of all that, it's a stormer with Blu-rays and DVDs, handy with multimedia files and built like a brick. In a good way. If you buy one, it'll be £1,300 well spent.

Finalists...

Arcam BDP100
First reviewed: HCC #194

The debut Blu-ray deck from Arcam (£1,000) was worth the wait, marrying a sleek uncluttered design to custom install-friendly connections and superb video and audio playback.



Denon DBP-1611UD
First reviewed: HCC #194

Denon's £400 DBP-1611UD can play any media you care to throw at it, including 3D Blu-rays, Super Audio CDs and DVD Audio discs – and it does it all with the brand's typical high-end swagger.



Samsung HT-C6930

Winner: Best home cinema system
First reviewed: HCC #192

The simplest way to step up from being a mere flatscreen TV owner to a home cinema aficionado is to get an all-in-one system. And they don't come more adept than Samsung's HT-C6930. Offering full 7.1-channel audio and 3D Blu-ray, the gloss black-designed package doesn't skimp on other features, either. Built-in wi-fi, twin HDMI inputs, home networking, online access, FM radio, iPod compatibility and auto-calibration are just some of the highlights of its extensive spec sheet. And with impressive visuals and a well-meshed soundfield, it's easy to call it a class-leading product.



Finalists...

LG HB-965TZ

First reviewed: HCC #187

LG's elegant-looking 5.1 system features sweet-sounding stand-mounted speakers and a slender but powerful sub, while the onscreen interface is effortlessly slick.



Panasonic BFT800EBK

First Reviewed: HCC #192

With its wireless subwoofer, sliding disc draw/iPod dock and designer looks, Panasonic's soundbar solution is one of the coolest products we've seen all year – and it sounds good, too.



Don't forget the Onk!



Onkyo's HT-S3305 couldn't be in the running for our Best Home Cinema System award as it doesn't actually feature a disc player, but it's still easy to recommend. This £330 package (reviewed in *HCC* #188) mixes a typically excellent Onkyo AVR with five satellites and a passive subwoofer, plus colour-coded speaker wire, for a foolproof and flexible surround sound upgrade. Just add a BD-spinner (and more – it features four HDMI v1.4 inputs) and you're in business.

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Release: StoreMags & FantaMag

WD TV Live Hub

Winner: Best digital media device
First reviewed: HCC #190

US brand Western Digital has made a name for itself with a range of affordable, easy-to-use media players, and the WD TV Live Hub is the cream of the crop. With its 1TB internal hard drive, it acts as a one-stop media library, but can also stream from other devices on your home network. File support is comprehensive, and playback is faultless. We particularly love it for its no-nonsense usability. Newcomers to the world of home networking certainly have nothing to fear here.

Finalists...

Sony SMP-N100
First reviewed: HCC #193

Sony's first foray into the world of networkable media players also provides access to the brand's brilliant Smart TV platform without actually having to buy one. Smart.



Synology DS410
First Reviewed: HCC #190

A speedy and convenient means of backing up data and distributing multimedia files, Synology's well-built DS410 can be fitted with up to 8TB of storage – which ought to be enough!





Humax HDR-FOX T2

Winner: Best digital recorder
First reviewed: HCC #187

Humax has set the standard for Freeview+ HD PVRs with its brilliant HDR-FOX T2, a neatly designed box that adds multimedia capabilities to free-to-air, hi-def TV and features a faultless, easy-on-the-eye EPG. There are plenty of rival products on the market, but none that so successfully blend style and substance.

Finalists...

Panasonic DMR-BW880
First reviewed: HCC #186

Another year, another outrageously specified Blu-ray recorder from Panasonic – this time toting twin Freeview HD tuners. An essential purchase for AV archivists.



Samsung BD-D8500
First reviewed: HCC #194

Samsung's Freeview HD PVR stands out a bit from the crowd by packing a fully-functional 3D Blu-ray deck in the same chassis – not to mention direct access to its Smart Hub portal.



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cinema rooms

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Installation Of The Month
IOTM
December 2010

HOME CINEMA Choice
2011 AWARD WINNER

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Onkyo TX-SR608

Winner: Best AV receiver/amplifier under £1,000
First reviewed: HCC #184

The first 3D-capable AVR to hit the market, Onkyo's TX-SR608 wowed us with its feature set, audio chops and mouthwatering price – charging only £450 for it seemed like lunacy. Almost everything buyers want from an entry-level receiver is present and correct, including Dolby Pro-Logic IIz and Audyssey DSX processing, mic-assisted RoomEQ, six HDMI inputs and THX approval, while in use it devoured multichannel movie mixes with relish. Onkyo has cornered the UK AVR market, and with models such as the TX-SR608 it's easy to see why.



Finalists...

Denon AVR-1611
First reviewed: HCC #191

Denon's £350 bottom-of-the-range AVR got the seal of approval from our Tech Labs for offering a class-leading power output and speaker terminals on all binding posts.

Yamaha RX-V1067
First Reviewed: HCC #190

With eight 3D-capable HDMI inputs and two outputs, Yamaha's £800 receiver is perfect for those with a component fetish, and its sound is dynamic, open and engaging.

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Denon AVR-4311

Winner: Best AV receiver/amplifier, £1,000-£2,000
First reviewed: HCC #193

In this price range there's a multitude of high-quality AVRs, but none impressed as much as Denon's £2,000 AVR-4311. Audio performance is thrilling, with blockbuster scale and thunder married to finesse and subtlety, while its ability to run a fully configurable 11.2-channel speaker setup can't be ignored.

And then there are its multimedia talents. Net radio, FLAC support, iPhone control and DNLA certification are all welcome, but the option of upgrading it to support Apple AirPlay is the icing on the cake.

Finalists...

Arcam AVR400
First reviewed: HCC #194

This £1,700 AVR from British brand Arcam eschews bells and whistles in favour of power on tap, classy design and a warm, rich sound with both movies and music.



Pioneer SC-LX83
First reviewed: HCC #186

This 7.1-channel powerhouse from Pioneer (£2,000) offers detailed, passionate sonics, sumptuous styling and the funkiest App control we've ever seen.



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Onkyo TX-NR5008

Winner: Best AV receiver/amplifier over £2,000
First Reviewed: HCC #191

Onkyo's flagship integrated AV receiver is definitely worthy of its range-topping status. This £2,400 THX Ultra2-certified beast has a rear panel awash with every conceivable hookup, battleship build quality, a full roster of features including ISF calibration modes for every input, and ran through our Tech Labs' tests without batting an eyelid. It soaks up whatever audio you feed it, too. All action movie mixes are delivered with ferocity and speed, while less in-yer-face music brings out the TX-NR5008's softer side.

Finalists...

Krell S-1200U & S-1500
First reviewed: HCC #184

Krell's £20,000 separates solution offers more than enough power to drive the most demanding systems, plus design and build quality that cannot be faulted.



NAD M25/M15HD
First Reviewed: HCC #183

A return to our Best Buy Awards for NAD's flagship Masters Series, this pre/power combi utilises a modular design to keep it ahead of the game, and sounds simply fantastic.



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Freeview+HD | Delivered by Humax



HDR-FOX T2

Beauty is in the eye of the viewer...

Glorious HD, digital recording, catch-up services and home networking

The Humax HDR-FOX T2 puts a world of content at your fingertips. Freeview TV and radio channels, glorious HD programmes, plus live pause, instant rewind and digital recording features that put you firmly in control of your viewing – all subscription free!

But the HDR-FOX T2 is much more than a digital TV recorder. Simply connect to your home network to launch the new Humax TV Portal – a gateway to a host of catch-up and on-demand TV, plus internet services.

The HDR-FOX T2 packs a punch:

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- Free HD TV channels*
- Play music, videos and photos through your TV
- Connect to PCs, set-top boxes and devices in the home to share content
- TV Portal for on-demand, catch-up and internet TV services

Unlock the potential of your TV. Visit www.humaxdigital.com/uk

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Sky Player sold separately and subject to separate terms. Subscription costs may apply. Broadband speed of 2MB or higher recommended. For full details visit www.humaxdigital.co.uk/skyplayer

*To find out if Freeview HD is available in your area, visit www.freeview.co.uk/HD

KEF T205

Winner: Best speaker system under £2,000
First reviewed: HCC #192



Sneaking a full-fat 5.1 system into your living room without the rest of your family noticing can be a tricky proposition. This is where KEF's new T-Series speakers come in. Using super-slim drivers built into wall-mountable cabinets, the T205 system is the ultimate stealth setup. More importantly, KEF's engineers have endowed it with a first-rate audio performance, but at a £1,500 price tag. Innovative and impressive.

Finalists...

Acoustic Energy Neo V2

First reviewed: HCC #191

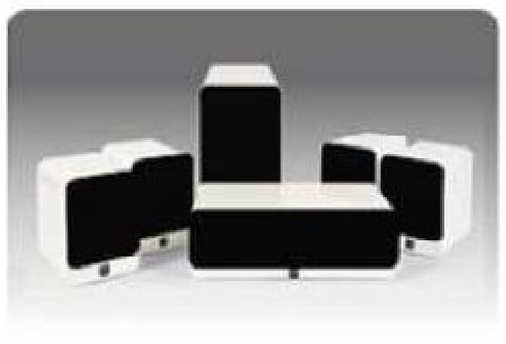
This 5.1 array from Acoustic Energy's Neo V2 stable can be yours for around £1,200. Considering the build quality, audio performance and tasteful design, that's an outrageous bargain.



Q Acoustics 2000 Series

First reviewed: HCC #185

Sub/sat systems don't come much sexier than Q Acoustics' diminutive 2000 Series, and it ticks all the right boxes for an affordable (around £550) home cinema package.



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PSB Imagine Series

Winner: Best speaker system, £2,000-£5,000
First reviewed: HCC #188

Canadian brand PSB might not be a household name in the UK, but we hope that changes. Its Imagine Series speakers are pure mid-range marvels.

This £3,000 5.1 package features a gorgeous design and build quality, and an astonishing performance. The Ferrofluid-cooled tweeters work in tandem with the mid-range drivers and 500W subwoofer to create an immersive soundfield suited to both hi-octane action flicks and multichannel music.

We wonder what PSB's high-end ranges sound like...

Finalists...

Monitor Audio Apex
First reviewed: HCC #190

Monitor Audio's high-end driver technology ensures this premium priced (£2,400) compact system delivers the goods – these speakers may be small, but their sound certainly isn't.



XTZ 99 Series
First reviewed: HCC #193

This 5.1 setup from Swedish manufacturer XTZ offers a *smörgåsbord* of fine-tuning capabilities and a surround sound performance beyond its £2,200 asking price.



Monitor Audio PL200AV

Winner: Best speaker system over £5,000
First reviewed: HCC #186



Monitor Audio knows that if you're going to call your speaker range the Platinum Series, you'd better make sure they sound good. But we were so blown away by this £11,500 5.1 setup that it could have been called the Iridium Series and we wouldn't have complained.

Designed from the ground up to be a flagship product, everything about the PL200AV system is pure class, from the reinforced packaging and bullet-proof build to the luscious finish and awe-inspiring sonics.

If you're speccing a high-end cinema room, you can't afford to ignore it.

Finalists...

Canton Vento 800 Series

First reviewed: HCC #194

Second only to the Reference range in Canton's stable, this £6,500 floorstanding 5.1 setup offers superb engineering, high-quality sonics and looks that could kill.



Stealth Acoustics LR Series

First reviewed: HCC #189

If you want speakers you can hear but can't see, this package of 'invisible' in-wall cabinets fits the bill perfectly. £7,000 gets you seven surrounds, two subs and jealous neighbours.



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Paradigm Signature Sub 2

Winner: Best subwoofer
First reviewed: HCC #183

Weighing 106kg, with six 10in drivers sucking on 4,500W of amplification, Paradigm's Signature Sub 2 is the mother of all subwoofers. Capable of reaching down to 7Hz, and delivering 126dB at 60Hz, we struggled to find the limits of its power with either movies or music. Build quality is astonishing, and the hexagonal design not only aids performance, but means it looks cute in your cinema room, too.



The case for doubling up



All of our award-winning subwoofers will sound great in your AV room, but if you want to get the tightest, loudest and most even bass across all possible listening positions then you might want to consider adding a second one. Or maybe even four.

Floyd E. Toole's book *Sound Reproduction: Loudspeakers and Rooms* is a great starting point if you want to know the acoustic science behind the benefits of multiple subwoofers – or you can just take *HCC*'s own Richard Stevenson's word for it. He's now running a brace of identical woofers and will tell anyone who asks how it's improved the low-end performance of his surround sound system. So much so that he's hoping to add two more.

Finalists...

BK Electronics XXLS400DF

First reviewed: HCC #191

This 12in woofer from British manufacturer BK Electronics delivers tight, precise bass and plenty of user control – all for around £400. A brilliant upgrade to your system.



Polk DSW MicroPRO 2000

First reviewed: HCC #186

Winner of our stealth subwoofer group test, Polk's 8-incher serves up a performance of mindboggling proportions from such a small enclosure. And it's simple enough for even a Luddite to use.



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BenQ W1000+

Winner: Best Projector under £5,000
First reviewed: HCC #193

A projector-based home cinema system no longer has to be a distant dream for AV enthusiasts – there's a growing band of full HD videochuckers available for the same price as a 40in TV. BenQ's £750 W1000+ is the cream of the crop, offering a dynamic, well-contrasted picture, extensive user calibration, quiet operation and a living-room friendly design. A perfect introduction to world of real home cinema.



Finalists...

JVC DLA-X3
First reviewed: HCC #193

At £3,600, this is currently the most affordable 3D projector around, and benefits from JVC's typically cinematic performance, assured build quality and simple setup.



Vivitek H5080
First reviewed: HCC #186

Vivitek's attack on the UK projector market continues with this superb single-chip DLP model with custom installer-friendly connections, and a consumer-friendly £2,700 price tag.



Game on with projection



If you're lucky enough to have a projector and screen then you really should be using it for bigscreen gaming as well as movies. First-person shooters that merely excite on a 50in TV become full-scale masterpieces when blown up to 100in. And the best game we've played all year? Not *Halo: Reach* but the sublime futuristic alien blaster *Crysis 2* which mixes kick-ass action with some of the best visuals around

Sony VPL-VW90ES

Winner: Best Projector £5,000 and over
First Reviewed: HCC #192

Sony's VPL-VW90ES doesn't just deliver an immersive, glitch-free 3D picture from its integrated IR transmitter and bundled active shutter spex, it also offers a stunning 2D image with silky shadow detail, seductive colours and best-in-class motion handling – when the going get tough, this SXRD projector has the power to keep up. A superb home cinema product, rounded out by a wealth of calibration options, whisper quiet operation and brooding good looks.



Finalists...

SIM2 MICO 40
First reviewed: HCC #189

Italian brand SIM2 regular blows us away with its £20,000+ projectors and the LED MICO 40 manages the same effect for nearly half the price. Capable of a truly mesmerising picture.

Runco LS-5
First reviewed: HCC #187

Custom install favourite Runco surprised us by unleashing this awesome DLP projector for only £7,500. Imagery is bright, dynamic and rich, and the calibration possibilities almost endless.

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Ken Ishiwata

HCC 2011 Hall of Fame Award



Every year, the HCC Hall of Fame Award celebrates those individuals whose contributions to the AV industry can be considered truly outstanding. It's a wonder, then, that it's taken us so long to bestow the award on Ken Ishiwata.

The one-time fashion photographer lives and breathes high-quality audio, and his more-than-30-year association with Marantz has resulted in some of the most lauded audiophile products ever made. Now Ken has turned his attention to finetuning the speakers of sister brand Boston Acoustics, and we can't wait to hear the results.

And, as the most stylishly dressed man in AV, the rest of our Hall of Famers better start re-evaluating their wardrobes...

Optoma 3D-XL

Winner: Best Accessory
First reviewed: HCC #194



It's our view that 3D works best when it's done big – but not everyone can afford to splash out on one of the few dedicated 3D projectors available. That's what makes Optoma's 3D-XL so brilliant – a £280 magic box that works in tandem with a 3D-ready DLP projector to bring three-dimensional fun to your viewing room at a size no TV can match.

A clever bit of innovation from a brand that knows a thing or two about bigscreen entertainment.

Finalists...

DSPeaker Anti-Mode 8033

First reviewed: HCC #1??

Want to banish bass bloom? Got £220? Then snap up this ingenious gadget from Finnish brand DSPeaker that auto EQs your subwoofer to overcome room resonance problems.



Screen Innovations Black Diamond 2

First reviewed: HCC #183

With its science-tastic grey fabric, this projector screen can greatly improve the picture quality of your home cinema by eliminating light scatter.



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Avatar: Collector's Edition

Winner: Best Disc
First reviewed: HCC #191



Twentieth Century Fox's three-disc Blu-ray release of James Cameron's sci-fi mega-smash is a must-buy for home cinema fans. The 5.1 DTS-HD mix is as perfect a blockbuster soundtrack as you can to imagine, the AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode is breathtaking in its beauty, and the bonus features are exhaustive. There's also a pretty good 3D Blu-ray release floating about, if you can get your hands on it...

Finalists...

Alien Anthology
First reviewed: HCC #188



Another cracking release from Fox, this box set serves up the entire sci-fi saga with astonishing transfers and sound mixes. An example to everyone of how to handle back-catalogue titles.

Resident Evil: Afterlife 3D
First reviewed: HCC #191



Without doubt the best 3D Blu-ray available on the high street, Sony Pictures' fourth instalment of zombie ass-kicking uses the extra dimension to brilliant effect. Grab it if you're 3D'd up.

Cinema Rooms

Winner: Installer of the Year
First reviewed: HCC #191

South East-based installer Cinema Rooms is responsible for this gorgeous-looking 12-seat home cinema that drips with hi-tech hardware. Artcoustic speakers provide 7.2-channel audio, Vivitek's LED-based H9080FD projector handles the visuals and intelligent lighting and control come courtesy of Crestron and Rako.

If we had this hi-def haven in our house, we'd probably never go out again...

Finalists...

FAB AV

First reviewed: HCC #184

One of two home theatres we've drooled over from St Albans company FAB AV in the last year, this spacious install features a potent AV combination of Kaleidescape server, Titan projector and Genelec active speakers.



Smartcomm

First reviewed: HCC #187

This stylish room was designed and specified by Buckinghamshire installer, Smartcomm, to be easy to use for a whole family. A foolproof Crestron control system means even the youngest visitor can enjoy the bigscreen movie experience.



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Krell S-1500/S-1200U

Winner: Special Reference Status Award
First reviewed: HCC #184



This amplifier/processor duo from luxury US brand, Krell, astonishes at every level, with exquisite build quality and exemplary AV performance. With this £20,000 pairing in full flow, movie soundtracks are huge, immersive, richly detailed, full-bodied and effortlessly smooth, with a naturalness that goes about as far as an amplifier can in assisting the film's suspension of disbelief. And that, of course, is what premium-quality home cinema is all about. Easily deserving of our Special Reference Status Award.

Finalists...

Eclipse Time Domain
First reviewed: HCC #189

In terms of design, build quality and pure audio performance, this £16,000 5.1 system from Japanese brand Eclipse has few peers. Speaker engineering at its best.

Samsung UE55C9000
First reviewed: HCC #185

Another nod for Samsung's £7,000 ultra-thin, high performance 3D LED TV. We're yet to come across a screen that can match it for pure wow factor.

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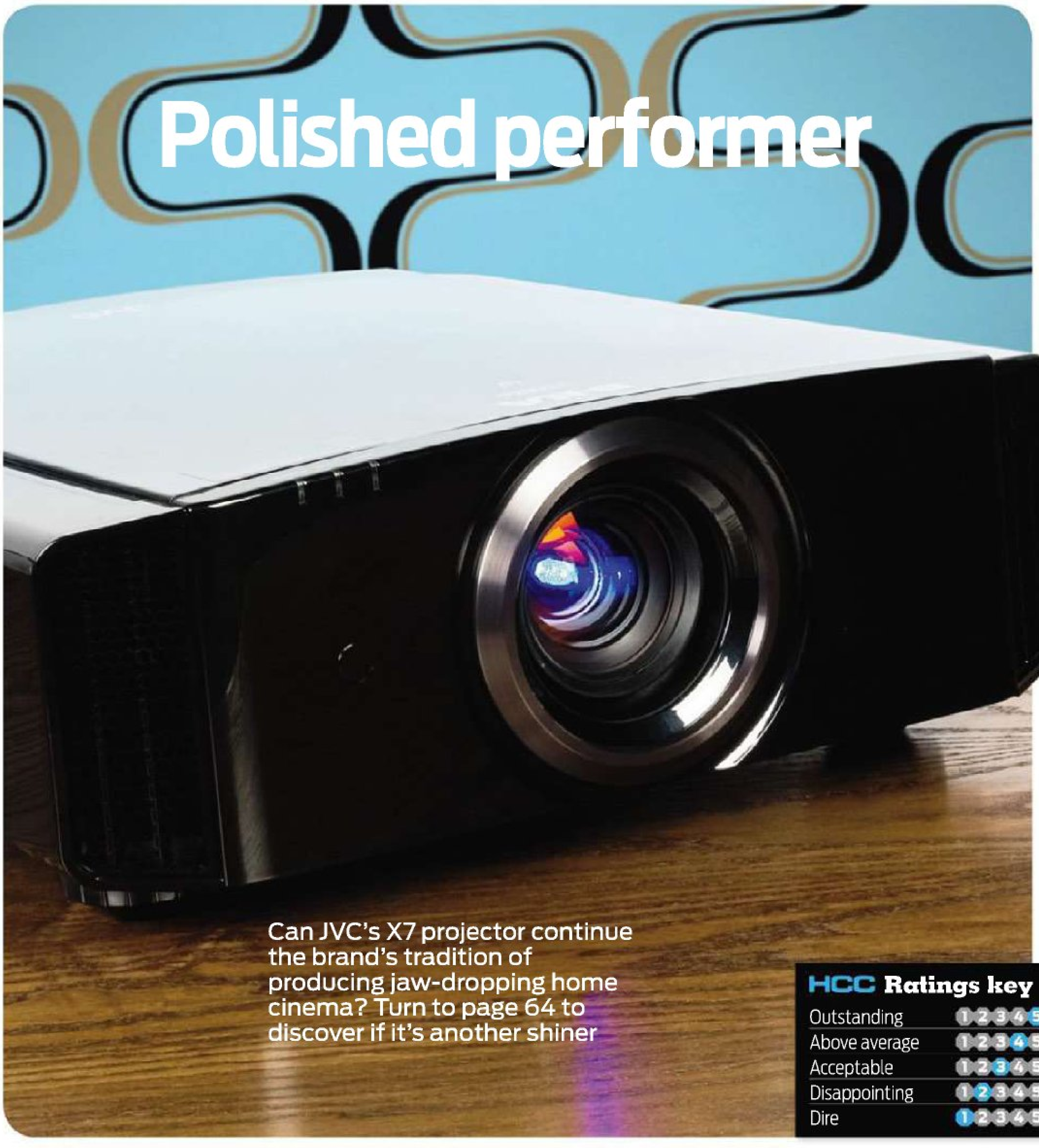
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REVIEWS

→Hardware highlights **PANASONIC** Second-gen 50in 3D plasma
ANTHEM Flagship AV receiver from Canadian brand **CAMBRIDGE AUDIO** Stealth 5.1 system
ONKYO The first of Onk's hotly-anticipated 2011 range **VIRGIN MEDIA** TiVo-powered triple tuner PVR
SCREEN EXCELLENCE Acoustically-transparent projector screen **TOSHIBA** 1TB media player

Polished performer



Can JVC's X7 projector continue the brand's tradition of producing jaw-dropping home cinema? Turn to page 64 to discover if it's another shiner

HCC Ratings key

Outstanding	1 2 3 4 **5**
Above average	1 2 3 **4** 5
Acceptable	1 2 **3** 4 5
Disappointing	1 **2** 3 4 5
Dire	**1** 2 3 4 5

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AV/CV

Product: 50in plasma TV with built-in second-gen active 3D playback and extensive multimedia functionality

Positioning: Mid-range with 42in and 46in GT30 models also available

Peers:
LG 47LW550T; Samsung UE46D7000

The GT30's NeoPlasma enhancement produces dynamic images that punch out of the screen

Release: StoreMags & FantaMag
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Keeping 3D active pays off

Panasonic's debut second-generation 3D plasma TV reminds **John Archer** what all the active 3D fuss is about



Panasonic's new active shutter P50GT30 3DTV doesn't exactly get off to a great start – you don't get even a single pair of (£100 a pop) active spex with the TV. Compare this with the seven free glasses currently being given away with LG's passive 3D TVs, and you can see why some people might find the latter technology attractive.

But my mood quickly improves with the eye-catchingly slim design that feels like it's been hewn from a single metal sheet. What's more, by adding a metallic silver trim to both the inside and outside of the bezel, Panasonic has actually given its latest plasma TV some style. Blimey.

The brand has also gone for broke with the set's connections. The four HDMIs should be enough for even the most forward thinking of AV systems, while multimedia fanatics will lap up the three USBs, D-Sub PC port, SD card slot, and LAN port, the latter being able to receive files from networked DLNA PCs.

The USBs can take an optional wi-fi dongle, play back a wide range of photo, video and music files, or be used to record from the set's Freeview and Freesat HD tuners to most USB-powered hard-disk drives.

The SD card slot can show photos from digital cameras, while the LAN slot also gives access to Panasonic's new Viera Connect online portal. The apps count is bound to increase over time, since the portal is built using a 'cloud' approach and with an open development platform.

Checking out the portal's current content via its slightly unwieldy 'burrow down' onscreen menu system reveals a solid, rather than inspired, suite of utilities. Highlights include: BBC iPlayer, Skype, the AceTrax movie purchase/rental platform, YouTube, and Eurosport.

Screen cred

Third-party endorsements seem to be increasingly important these days, and the P50GT30 has two: one from calibration guru the Imaging Science Foundation and another from THX. The former relates to the screen having plenty of video calibration tools, including passable colour management and middling gamma controls. The THX accreditation, meanwhile, points to simple quality, with the TV earning its THX seal of approval for both its 2D and 3D pictures. There's also a THX picture preset that proves a fine default setting for HD movie viewing.

For motion handling and stability, the P50GT30 combines 600Hz sub-field drive technology and Panasonic's Intelligent Frame Creation (IFC) system, which interpolates extra frames of image data to reduce judder.

Last year's equivalent GT20 plasma models delivered a great combination of value and performance, but the GT30's pictures instantly look far better.

I was initially quite surprised by this. Partly because of how good the GT20s were for their money, and partly because it's a mid-range model rather than a flagship one. But the more I looked into what might be behind the improvements, the more it became clear how much effort Panasonic has put into revamping its plasma technology for 2011. In fact, rather than squeezing all this 'NeoPlasma' information in here, we'll be going into it in further detail in our next issue, so watch this space.

There are two areas in particular where the P50GT30's pictures surge ahead of its predecessor: brightness and colour. Brightness levels are in a different league and colours look more vibrant and saturated, adding up to a picture that's much more dynamic and punchy. This does

→ Specifications

3D: *YES* Active shutter
HD Ready: *YES* including 1080p/24
Tuner: *YES* Freeview HD and Freesat HD
Component video: *YES* one input (rear)
HDMI: *YES* four, including v1.4 options
PC input: *YES* one D-Sub
Resolution: 1920x1080p
Sound: 20W
Brightness: N/A
Contrast ratio: 5million:1
Dimensions (off stand): 1,177(w) x 753(h) x 58(d)mm Weight: 25.5kg
Also featuring: '600Hz'; Viera Connect service; USB media playback (MP3, JPEG, HD video support included); Intelligent Frame Creation processing; NeoPlasma technology; DLNA support wi-fi dongle option; THX/ISF; colour and gamma management; noise reduction



Good-looker: Panasonic's 2011 plasmas feature an improved bezel design

much to counter the most familiar complaint raised against the brand's plasma panels, namely that they look rather muted versus the aggressive images produced by most LCD TVs.

The extra brightness and colour vibrancy also, of course, has a hugely positive impact on the P50GT30's 3D capabilities. For, where last year the GT20's 3D images lacked colour punch and lost considerable shadow detail in dark areas, the GT30's colours remain much more believable and eye-catching with Panasonic's active shutter glasses installed on your nose. And dark areas appear much less 'hollow'.

Black joy

Underlining the P50GT30's marked colour and brightness improvements is a further familiar plasma strength: an excellent black level response. Having deep, naturally toned black colours present in the same frame as bright, colourful elements without having to compromise the image's overall brightness level (as you do with most CCFL LCD and edge-LED TVs) produces an extreme and consistent contrast range that's a joy to behold. What's more, there's none of that nasty backlight inconsistency you can get with LCD TVs, especially the edge-lit ones.

Black levels hold up superbly when watched from a wide angle, too, contrary to our experience with the vast majority of LCD TVs. Colours, similarly, retain their saturation levels over a much wider viewing angle than you get with LCD TVs.

Yet more good news finds the P50GT30 delivering a stunning sense of the sharpness and detail with both 2D and 3D images – the latter fact providing a timely reminder of why active 3D was originally created.

Finally, plasma's advantage over LCD when it comes to response times is also superbly evident in terms of the image's almost total freedom from 3D crosstalk and complete lack of motion blur. There's some judder at times, particularly when watching camera pans in 50Hz PAL material. But if this bothers you it can be addressed via the IFC system, which can be used on its Medium setting without generating too many unwanted side-effects.

Joining the mostly stellar P50GT30 pictures is a satisfying audio effort. There's not as much power and dynamic range as I'd hoped for, especially at the bass end, but the soundstage is open and clear, with good treble detailing.

Do I have any downers on the P50GT30's performance? Well, some LCD TVs, especially Samsung's, still deliver slightly more shadow detail with 3D, but only at the expense of more crosstalk. Also, Panasonic's 3D glasses still remove considerable brightness from the picture and are probably the most uncomfortable ones Ie've used.

Finally I spotted signs of image retention if I left a bright image element stationary on the screen for even just a few minutes – although these issues should diminish over time, and can be removed easily via a provided 'screen wipe' feature.

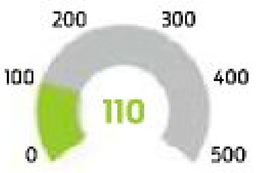
But let's not get caught up on the negatives, because relative to the P50GT30's many and outstanding talents, the bad stuff doesn't amount to a hill of beans

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



White screen: Defaults to a CATS mode, which uses a sensor to adjust brightness according to ambient light



Test footage: With volume maxed and CATS on, average consumption with a movie is good for 50in plasma

TV Contrast: Ratio



Picture: No way near the 5million:1 claim, but in THX mode with CATS on we measured 44,000:1. Switching CATS off lowered it to 8,000:1 with an increase in luminance

Colour accuracy



Presets: In normal mode, both Warm and THX hit 6,000K. Courtesy of manual white-balance adjustment, 6500K is possible
Cool: 9,400K
Normal: 7,000K
Warm: 6,000K
THX: 6,000K



HCC VERDICT

Panasonic TX-P50GT30
£1,800 Approx

Highs: Great build quality; stunning pictures with either 2D or 3D
Lows: No 3D glasses included; minor image retention concerns; 3D pictures much less bright than 2D

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

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Raiders of the ARC

With its quirky and complex setup, the ARC-based MX-700 still manages to put **Richard Stevenson** into a state of audio-induced euphoria



Canada: a land of sweeping mountains, pine forests and ice hockey, where maple syrup rules and giant moose walk the streets. But what the country is becoming increasingly famous for is its rather tasty AV equipment.

Anthem's classy high-end D2V processor and P-series power amps wowed our high-end sensibilities last year, leading to a three-strong lineup of more affordable AV receivers coming to these shores for 2011.

Here we have the range-topping MRX 700 coming in at around £2,100 and competing with the likes of Denon's AVR-4311 and Onkyo's TX-NR5008. From the cosmetics alone you can trace the MRX 700's lineage from the D2V and they share more than a few design features and philosophies, too. Compared to the D2V's cluttered looks, which I suggested had a fascia ideally suited to an enclosed cupboard, the 700 is positively stylish. The silver buttons and bold white logos on matt black are a long way from the elegance of British or Japanese receivers, but it's nothing like as cluttered as the D2V, and the side flap over the front inputs is a very neat touch.

As Canadian as maple syrup: This AVR has the confidence to forge its own path

This contrast between AV receivers from differing nations continues under the casework, too. Anthem has its own state-of-the-art electronics and software design facility in Ottawa, shared with sister brand Paradigm, and it clearly has

Silver buttons and white logos are dotted across the black fascia

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the *cajones* to forge its own path rather than follow the herd.

The MRX 700 is no Swiss army knife of functionality, and in a game of pure features strip poker it would be sitting at the card table in nothing but its boxer shorts long before the Denon and Onkyo. The focus is on delivering the best possible sound quality at the given price without diluting the R&D budget with widgets and fluffery that you might not use anyway.

AV/CV

Product: 7.1-channel AV receiver

Positioning: Top of the new MRX range

Peers: Denon AVR-4311; Onkyo TX-NR5008

PARC life

Of course, it has decoding for all mainstream standard and high-resolution movie and music sound formats, USB inputs with an iPod dock on the way, upscaling to 1080p, Ethernet networking and even a Dolby ProLogic IIz height channel option. But that is your lot for secondary features. There's no independent multi-room AV, or Airplay, no bespoke anti-jitter digital link-ups and (at present) no iPad App remote control. There is also a quite amazing lack of big-name component brands such as Anchor Bay, ISF, Burr-Brown etc, and virtually all the electronics are born and bred in-house at the Paradigm Advanced Research Centre, or PARC. Most notable of these is Anthem's own ARC EQ system, notable for being a lightly pared-down version of the ARC system found on the D2V. And that is the best-sounding EQ system of any I am yet to hear by a long, Canadian country mile.

Setup and installation is not necessarily for the faint hearted, though, because the protocols and accepted procedures used by almost all other manufactures have gone right out of the window. Unlike the competition, that supply a little plastic bodied set-up mic, the MRX range comes with a solid aluminium USB audio mic, an easily adjustable tripod, cables and software for your laptop. The whole set up procedure is controlled from the PC which runs thorough a complete Real Time Analysis (RTA) measurement before applying its comprehensive filters for best stereo music and multichannel movie response curves. ARC feels so much more flexible on the PC than an in-receiver based system and the filtering range runs from 5kHz right down to 20Hz – a lot lower than Audyssey's effective range. Moreover, the sheer number-crunching power and data storage requirements are moved to a dedicated device (ie your laptop, notepad, PC etc) offering much greater depth, detail and flexibility in the system.

Okay, I admit, the setup is actually rather mind bogglingly complex. The laptop-based EQ will no doubt have some users running for the hills and the onscreen interface is simply not as logical or as well laid out as the slick GUIs on the latest Japanese receivers. If you do use the setup without the safety net of a dealer installation, I guarantee you will be flicking back and forth through the manual wondering why certain things just aren't working. Still, we like a challenge.

True Grit

The 7 x 120W amps are traditional class A/B design, fed from a chunky power supply to ensure plenty of current for big multichannel swells. As per most receivers, the EQ system defaults to being on, but it is worth spending some time with the MRX >



→ Specifications

Dolby TrueHD: *YES* with Dolby Volume
DTS-HD Master Audio: *YES* and DTS ES 6.1 Discrete
THX: *NO*
Multichannel audio: *YES* 7x120W
Multichannel output: *YES* 7.1 channel
Multiroom: *YES* Zone 2, audio-only
HDMI: *YES* 4-in, 1-out v1.4a
AV inputs: *YES* 4 x composite video & phono audio; 2 x coaxial and 3 x optical
Video upscaling: *YES* to 1080p
Component video: *YES* 3-in, 1-out
Dimensions: 439(w) x 390(d) x 164(h) mm
Weight: 16.1kg
Features: AM/FM tuner; Anthem Room Correction (ARC) infinite impulse response-based EQ software; supplied high quality mic and tripod; USB input; separate switchable configuration for music and movies; IR input; Dolby Headphone; backlit remote control

HOME CINEMA Choice ★★★★ BEST BUY



Connection quandary: Only four HDMI inputs and one output might limit setup options

700 with the EQ off to start with. It is a robust sounding beast with plenty of 'oomph' on tap. **The natural stance is a heavyweight balance that delivers a soundstage forged of granite with lead trimmings and ballast in the belly**. With suitably dense and moody movies such as *Hellboy II* on Blu-ray the sense of dark foreboding is amplified with crushingly intense effects, and the bass presence threatens to squeeze the air out of your chest. While impressive with the right movie it's all a bit heavy for *Love, Actually* or *Toy Story*.

Engage the ARC and the effect is nothing short of astonishing. The system's grip and control of the lower frequencies is stunning, turning phat bass with added room reverb into ultra-tight, mega-punchy effects with lightning-fast transient attack. Better still, it does this without culling any of the bass power. Quite the opposite in fact! Gunfire has incredible power that will flap your bell-bottoms with every round, and explosions attempt to physically pitch you off the sofa in a sharp-edged wave of percussive violence.

The ARC's control over the subwoofer in particular is way ahead of the game, making even Velodyne's excellent built-in EQ on the DD18 sound woolly by comparison.

Pure fairy dust

In *Hellboy 2*, as the tooth fairies fly around the auction house, the scale and dimension of the soundstage is perfectly formed, becoming wide, spacious and uncluttered. The effects come fast and furious with the newly dry and tightly focused bass underpinning every effect. As Hellboy unloads round after round at the fairies, the effect is thrilling and immersive, the MRX 700 punching well above its price point in terms of adrenaline-fuelled action.

Stepping the pace down produces sound that is cleaner, crisper and more infectious with the ARC engaged, bringing life and sparkle to slower-paced movies and Pixar classics alike. Dialogue is precision-crafted 'front of house' with admirable tonal accuracy to voices.

It is an incredibly impressive and involving sound, but the ARC does have its limitations on the MRX series. For example, compared to the implementation on the D2V, it is not quite as sophisticated and the upper frequency EQ stops at 5kHz.

This means that any top-end issues borne of, say, feisty speakers with too much treble, for instance, or an over-damped room, packed full of Laura Ashley's finest soft furnishings, are left untouched.

With my elderly Tannoys and their now rather smooth and rolled-off top end, the Anthem never achieved the sheer magic of the full-bandwidth D2V ARC system. That said, it is still very impressive and some seven grand cheaper, too. Cool.

ARC royal

With the ARC tuned to perfection, the MRX 700 establishes a new standard of sonic performance at this price point, and leaves the rest of the pack sounding a little lacklustre by comparison. Okay, so there is no Audyssey DSX, AirPlay, full multi-room, Napster, THX modes and so on, but does that matter? Possibly not. Decisions, decisions...

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts

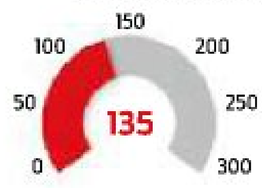


Idling: Another AVR that you're advised to switch off when you're not using it

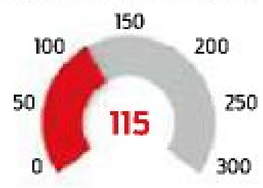


Powered: In five-channel mode and at a comfortable listening level, real world consumption averages 120W

Power ratings: Watts (8Ω, 0.5% THD)

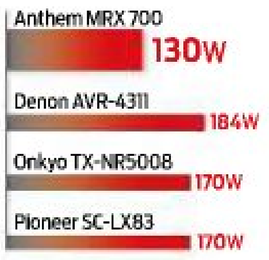


2-channel 8Ω: Our Tech Labs measured 135W into 8Ω in two-channel mode, which is above Anthem's specification



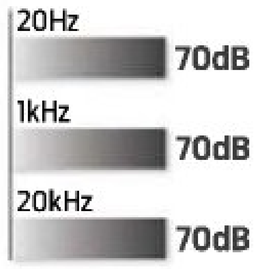
5-channel 8Ω: As expected there is a drop-off in power in five-channel mode to 115W, and to 80W in seven-channel mode

Untainted: Watts



Fidelity firewall: A measurement of power untainted by distortion (0.03THD, 8Ω, 1kHz), the Anthem is somewhat eclipsed by its Japanese rivals

Signal/noise: dB



S/N tests: A solid measurement across the frequency range



HCC VERDICT

Anthem MRX 700
£2,100 Approx

Highs: Fantastically engaging sound; excellent ARC EQ system; exceptional build

Lows: Complex to set up, frugal features; low HDMI count

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**

Design: 1 2 **3** 4 5

Features: 1 2 **3** 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

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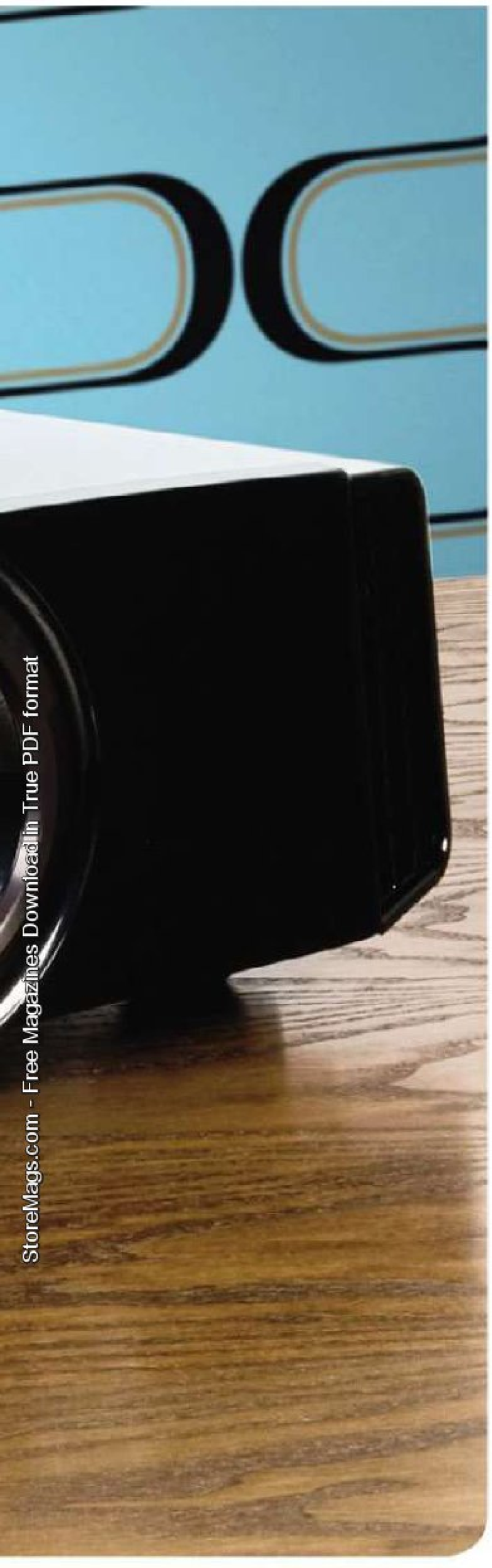
If you still aren't convinced about 3D, **John Archer** has no doubt at all that JVC's latest projector will change your mind



➜ Specifications

3D ready: YES Full HD: YES Can handle 1080p/24
Component video: YES 1 HDMI: YES 2 x v 1.4
PC input: YES D-Sub 12V trigger: YES 1
Resolution: 1,920 x 1,080
Brightness (claimed): 1300 ANSI Lumens
Contrast ratio (claimed): 70,000:1
Dimensions: 455(w) x 179(h) x 472(d)mm
Weight: 15.1kg
Features: Active 3D playback; 3D transmitter and one pair of glasses included; colour management; x2 optical zoom; high/low lamp modes; noise reduction; motion processing; THX endorsement; ISF support; RS232 jack; motorised image shift; 12-point gamma correction

Distinguishing mark:
The only way to tell the X7 apart from its X3 sibling is by the THX logo on the front edge



Not everyone 'gets' 3D. Indeed, there are days when I'm not sure I totally need it myself. But not so today.

At the root of my sudden 3D love-in is JVC's new DLA-X7 projector. Regular readers will know that I've already tested and thoroughly enjoyed the brand's entry-level and ridiculously good value DLA-X3 (see *HCC* #193). But the step-up X7 really does take quality to another level.

Not that the qualitative leap is obvious from the outside. For, at first glance, it appears identical to the X3, with the same large, vaguely elliptical body shape, impressively polished finish and striking racing car-style vents down either side.

The X7 does weigh slightly more than its sibling for some reason, but really the only obvious external sign of the X7's step-up status is the addition of a little THX logo on its upper edge...

For dedicated home cinema fans, of course, this logo is potentially very important, as it shows that the X7 has been officially endorsed by the legendary third-party 'quality assurance' group. What's more, the logo refers to the machine's performance with both 2D and 3D, meaning THX was convinced about such key 3D issues as brightness, colour and crosstalk noise.

Professional thumbs up

While I'm on the subject of endorsements, the X7 joins the X3 in being supported by the Imaging Science Foundation (ISF), which considers the projector flexible enough to be professionally calibrated by one of its experts.

Among the tools available are fuller colour management tools than you get on the X3 (including a unique option to adjust the picture's orange balance), a 12-point gamma adjustment system, and lamp output and manual static iris settings.

The colour management system is a little unusual in its presentation, but you can get it to bend to your will after a little experimentation. It's pretty likely, however, that most people buying this projector will have it installed professionally.

The X7's more basic set-up tools – motorised image shifting, focus and optical zoom – are impressive in terms of both range and the finesse with which you can fine-tune them. And it's decently connected, with its twin v1.4 HDMIs, D-Sub PC port (the latter not found on the X3), RS232, LAN port and 12V trigger port. I always find myself wishing for a third HDMI on projectors at the X7's level, but JVC is hardly alone in sticking with two.

One other notable connection is the port that enables you to add JVC's external 3D transmitter. For, unlike Sony's VPL-VW90ES active 3D projector, JVC's models don't incorporate the necessary 3D transmitter within the main projector chassis. This might annoy some, though actually I think the flexibility it offers in terms of being able to optimise IR transmission angles could be quite handy for some room installations. More annoying is the fact that JVC only includes one pair of active shutter glasses as standard (though even this is more than you get if you buy the X7 in most other European territories).

Peruse the X7's quoted specifications and you'll notice that while it has the same 1300 ANSI Lumens of maximum brightness as the X3, it promises a 70,000:1 contrast ratio compared with the X3's 50,000:1. And let's not forget with JVC's D-ILA projectors that these are native contrast figures. In other words, you should be able to enjoy a truly extreme contrast performance without seeing the sort of distracting brightness 'jumps' you get when other projectors use dynamic irises to achieve better contrast.

And so it proves. For **just as I've found with so many JVC D-ILA projectors before, the X7 can deliver a contrast range that's nothing short of awesome.**

The main contributory factor to this is the X7's superlative black level response. I simply haven't seen a better black colour from a projector costing less than five figures. Even better, the deep, rich blacks don't look forced or dominant, thanks to the appearance of genuine shadow detail and subtle colour differentiation within even the darkest areas.

I felt on occasion as if the X3's black level response wasn't quite as good as that of JVC's previous equivalent model (perhaps as a result of JVC having increased the X series' brightness output substantially to counteract shutter 3D's tendency to reduce brightness). With the X7, though, you get the best of both worlds: a significantly boosted brightness boost over

AV/CV

Product:
3D home cinema projector with JVC's D-ILA technology

Positioning:
Midway in JVC's three-strong X series of projectors. About £3,000 separates it from the models to either side

Peers:
Sony VPL-EW90ES

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Plug 'n' play: Alongside the usual video inputs, you'll find a hook up for JVC's external 3D transmitter

last year's equivalent HD750 model, but also a black level depth at least as good as that of its ground-breaking predecessor. Not surprisingly this combination makes for an image of frequently jaw-dropping dynamism.

Cranked up brightness

It's also a combination that serves the X7's 3D playback extremely well. For where last year's DLA series would have left 3D looking muted and dull (if they'd been able to display the new format), the 30 per cent boost in brightness JVC has introduced for its current range means **the X7's 3D images look punchy and richly coloured** – although as with any serious projector, I'd recommend a completely blacked out room if you want the very best effect.

The X7 also suffers even less with crosstalk ghosting noise than Sony's VPL-VW90ES. In fact, it seldom bothered me at all, even during scenes such as the notoriously tricky Golden Gate Bridge sequence in *Monsters Vs Aliens*. This is very impressive indeed considering how I've become an obsessive crosstalk hater over the past 12 months.

However, the really good thing about the X7's 3D pictures is their sheer size. For seeing great 3D discs such as *Despicable Me* and *Avatar* delivered well on a screen more than 100in in breadth is enough to win over even the most die-hard 3D sceptic. I've seen it happen.

My biggest gripe with the X7's 3D playback actually doesn't involve its picture quality. Rather it's the relatively loud running noise the PJ kicks out when using the high-brightness 3D preset. It's not unbearable, but it could be enough to persuade some people to sacrifice brightness and switch the lamp power output to its lowest level, which greatly reduces cooling noise.

Fab with flat-o-vision

However impressive the X7's 3D pictures might be, 3D viewing will probably only occupy a small proportion of your total viewing time (unless you're James Cameron). So it's handy that the X7 is also a terrific 2D projector. On top of its impressive handling of dark sequences are punchy whites that are a big step forward from last year's models, intense colours and clean motion handling, even without resorting to the provided motion processing circuitry.

I'd also like to commend the X7's complete freedom from distracting video noise and its terrific sharpness, which did full justice to the exceptionally detailed Blu-ray transfer of *The Social Network* during my audition period.

The big question for the X7, I guess guess, is whether it can really justify costing nearly twice as much as the X3. In my opinion it can, because it delivers a marked improvement over its cheaper sibling.

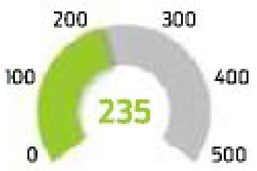
It'll be interesting to see how the flagship X9 can be even better...

Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



White screen: An expected power consumption from such a potent projector – 'high' lamp mode increases it 305W



Test footage: No change in power use with movie footage

Contrast: ratio



Picture: An excellent real world contrast ratio, with a brightness of 13.3fL

Colour temp: Kelvin



Presets: A range of CT presets that we measured as being sightly off (see below). But you can create your own user setting to achieve 6,500K
5,500K: 6300K
6,000K: 6800K
6,400K: 7,400K
7,500K: 8,500K



HCC VERDICT

JVC DLA-X7
£6,500 approx

Highs: Stunning 2D and 3D pictures; plenty of set-up and calibration flexibility; solid value
Lows: Minor crosstalk with 3D; slightly tricky colour management

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

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What's the Stor.e?

Cliff Joseph goes on a file frenzy with Toshiba's 1TB media player



Black box: Store.E TV+ sits by your TV without offending your eye

There's no shortage of 'multimedia hard disks' available these days, and they're handy for people who want to store photos, music and video files and play them on a TV or music system. However, most of these devices are produced by specialist hard disk manufacturers and they aren't always as user-friendly as they could be – so I was curious to see what additional expertise mass market brand Toshiba would bring to its Stor.E TV+.

This is a neat little black box that sits alongside your TV. Two versions are available: the one reviewed here with a 1TB internal hard disk and a 2TB model at £200 (cheaper than rivals such as the popular WD TV, which costs £199 with a 1TB hard disk).

A glance around the back reveals two USB ports – one for connecting to a PC, and the other for attaching a memory stick, external hard disk or camera – along with an Ethernet port for network connection and HDMI port that provides 1080p output for your HD TV. There's also a composite video output, analogue stereo and coaxial connector for 5.1 audio. On the right-hand side of the unit you get a third USB port and a memory card reader, too.

However, I was a little disappointed when I powered up the Stor.E TV+ to find a decidedly functional onscreen interface. Its main Home screen consists of eight just icons, which enable you to browse the contents of the internal hard disk, connected USB devices or memory cards, or to adjust network and other settings.

One option that did catch my eye, though, was the 'External DVD' icon that lets you connect a USB DVD drive to the Stor.E TV+ and use it to play discs. You can control playback using the standard remote control provided and this also includes an 8X zoom for video playback, 32X fast forward/back or 1/16X slow-motion.

The Stor.E TV+ can also play a good range of audio and video file formats. It handled my mixed iTunes library of AAC and MP3 audio files with no problems, and produced good results with a number of HD video test files. Supporting uPnP, it can also play media files stored on games consoles on your network.

Achilles' Heel

The Stor.E TV+ does have some rough edges, though. There's no support for DivX or Xvid formats, and MP4 files from iTunes with the .m4v suffix had to be relabelled as MP4. The files played perfectly well, but renaming is tedious work.

You can browse through individual folders on the internal hard disk, but the device won't let you check your music library by artist, genre or album title, as per the WD TV. Toshiba boasts that the Stor.E TV+ can store 1,000s of hours of media files, but it needs to provide more efficient browsing options to help you find what you want more quickly

AV/CV

Product: Multimedia hard disk with HDMI output

Positioning: Buy it along with your new Toshiba TV

Peers: Western Digital WD TV; Apple TV

→ Specifications

Storage: 1TB
UPnP Compliant: Yes
Connectivity: 10/100 Ethernet; 3 x USB; Memory card reader (SD, MMC, Memory Stick); HDMI v1.3; coaxial digital audio; composite; stereo phono output
Dimensions: 46.4(h) x 206(w) x 160(d)mm
Weight: 1.3Kg
Audio file formats: MP3, AAC, WMA, OGG, FLAC, Dolby Digital, DTS Digital
Video file formats: MPEG-1, MPEG-2, MPEG-4, AVI, H.264, WMV9, MKV, MOV, VOB, VIDEO_TS

HCC VERDICT

Toshiba Stor.E TV+
£170 Approx

Highs: Large hard disk; supports good range of audio and video file formats

Lows: Inelegant graphical interface; limited browsing options

Performance: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Design: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Features: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Overall: 1 2 **3** 4 5

AWARDS 2011 **HOME CINEMA CHOICE**

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Stereokeys.com



Future-proof hero

Danny Phillips auditions the musically-endowed, super-featured AVR from the brand with a big reputation for value

Every year, Onkyo's home cinema hubs top the bestseller lists, appealing to punters looking for an amp that delivers maximum bang for their buck.

And this year, the company clearly intends to retain its position at the top. The 7.2-channel TX-NR609 is the most advanced model in Onkyo's first wave of 2011 receivers, offering full network capability and a couple of exciting world firsts.

Chief among these is its ability to stream music directly from Spotify. With over 10 million songs available in 320k quality, it could put your MP3 player out of a job, but you'll need a Premium account to use it.

Alongside this is a wealth of other connected services, including vTuner internet radio, Napster, Last.fm, and DLNA-certified music streaming from networked devices. All of these are accessed at the touch of a button using gloriously simple menus. The Spotify interface is particularly good, displaying cover art and providing access to playlists and features such as 'What's New' and 'Starred'.

It's also the world's first receiver to feature Marvell Qdeo video processing technology, which has the power to upscale any video source to 3840 x 2160 (4K) resolution. This may not have any practical use right now, but could be handy when sets like Toshiba's 4K glasses-free TV hit the shops within the next 12 months.

Above and beyond

Headline-grabbers aside, when it comes to such fundamentals as audio processing, amplification and performance, it's pretty much untouchable at this price. Like its predecessor, the brilliant TX-SR608, the NR609 is THX Select2 Plus certified, decodes any HD audio format and offers 7 x 160W of grunt, with two LFE pre-outs if you want to bulk up bass with a second sub. There's even a choice of 'vertical surround' processing, with Dolby Pro Logic IIz and Audyssey DSX both

Stereokeys.com



Specifications

Dolby Digital TrueHD: *YES*
DTS-HD Master Audio: *YES*
THX: *YES* Select2 Plus
Multichannel audio: *YES* 7 x 160W
Multichannel input: *NO*
Multiroom: *YES* Zone 2
AV inputs: *YES* 4 composite inputs, 6 analogue stereo, 4 digital audio inputs (2 x optical and 2 x coaxial)
HDMI: *YES* 6 in, 1 out, all v1.4
Video upscaling: *YES* Up to 3,840 x 2,160
Component input/output: *YES* 2 in, 1 out
Dimensions: 435(w) x 173.5(h) x 328(d)mm
Weight: 11.3kg
Features: Spotify, vTuner, Napster, Last.fm; DLNA & Windows 7-certified; Marvell Qdeo upscaling; Audyssey DSX, 2EQ, Dynamic EQ, Dynamic Volume; Dolby Pro Logic IIz; MP3, WMA, FLAC, WAV, Ogg Vorbis, AAC and LPCM support; onscreen menus; 2 x sub pre-outs; analogue RGB video input; USB port with direct digital iPod support; music optimizer; Pure Audio mode; Double Bass; Phase Locked Loop jitter cleaning circuit for S/PDIF; 32-bit DSP chip with 4 gaming modes; TI Burr-Brown 192kHz/24-bit DACs for all channels

Tech Labs

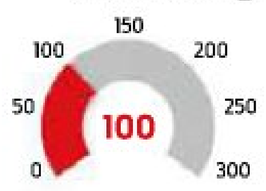
Power consumption: Watts



Idling: Reasonable power consumption for an AVR of this complexity

Powered: With movie footage, real world use averages 150W with five channels driven

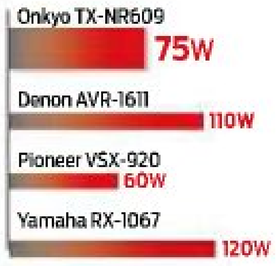
Power ratings: Watts (8Ω, 0.5% THD)



2-channel 8Ω: Delivers a solid stereo measurement, although below Onkyo's own specification

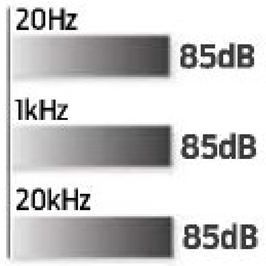
5-channel 8Ω: This multichannel figure is very good considering the receiver's market position

Untainted: Watts



Fidelity firewall: A measure of power achieved before distortion becomes unacceptable (0.03%THD). The Onkyo is up to spec but not as 'clean' as some rivals

Signal/noise: dB



S/N tests: Good, but not excellent across all frequencies – high listening levels are afflicted by a noticeable hiss

vying for your attention. The latter offers greater flexibility, enabling you to use the surround back speakers as front height or front wide channels (although with only seven channels, you will have to give up those surround backs no matter what.)

On the socketry front, you get no less than six HDMI v1.4 inputs (one of which is found on the front) making it ready to receive full HD 3D signals and audio from an ARC-compatible TV. Other highlights come in the shape of powered Zone 2 output, an analogue RGB input for PCs and a USB port with extensive media playback. The Ethernet connection is currently your only way of getting online, but Onkyo is set to launch a wireless USB adaptor. On the minus side, there are no multichannel analogue inputs.

Build quality is spot-on and Onkyo has revamped the external design, to include a flat fascia with buttons discreetly tucked along the grooves. While classy, the exposed sockets are asking for trouble if you have kids.

Get set

The Audyssey 2EQ auto setup works its magic with the supplied mic and test tones, or you can DIY by delving into the onscreen setup menu, which uses the same logical layout as last year's models but with swanky new fonts and graphics.

Its performance is magnificent, handling Blu-ray soundtracks with consummate control, roof-raising power and the same deftness of touch that graced its predecessor.

During the sedate opening scenes of *Inception*, it gently caresses the lapping waves, teasing out the background ambience. And the expository dialogue is articulated with admirable clarity and body.

But as the dream starts to fall apart, **the Onkyo handles the epic-scale action with thunderous power, swift, decisive steering and terrific effects placement**.

Debris crashes to the floor with a chandelier-shaking thump, while the wave of water cascading into the room mixes frightening low-frequency presence with clean top-end detail. It's a top-drawer movie performer, and although you'll get even greater power and subtlety from more expensive models, we doubt you'll hear many better £500 amps this year. The TX-NR609 is a force to be reckoned with

AV/CV

Product: Network-enabled 7.2-channel AV receiver

Position: Sits above TX-SR309, NR509 and NR579

Peers: Denon AVR-2311; Pioneer VSX-920; Yamaha RX-V1067



HCC VERDICT

Onkyo TX-NR609
£500 Approx

Highs: Comprehensive features; stunning sound quality
Lows: No analogue multichannel inputs

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

AWARDS 2011 **HOME CINEMA CHOICE**

Warp, weft winner

John Archer auditions an acoustically transparent projection screen that pleases his ears and his eyes

Despite being a relatively new name on the UK projection screen scene, Screen Excellence (part of U.See Ltd) has already successfully established itself, apparently as a result of the product that's really catching the eye of both end users and custom installers alike. And that's the EN4K fabric, as fitted for our test into the motorised RM2-T rig.

So just what's so special about this textile? Well, essentially, it's a proprietary acoustically transparent screen that avoids the picture problems often associated with such screens (to the extent that it's apparently '4k compatible'), while also costing surprisingly little.

Meanwhile, the 100in RM2-T rig looks fairly unassuming, having been designed to be unobtrusive when you're not using it. The container for the screen is just a long, flat-backed barrel in a metallic black finish.

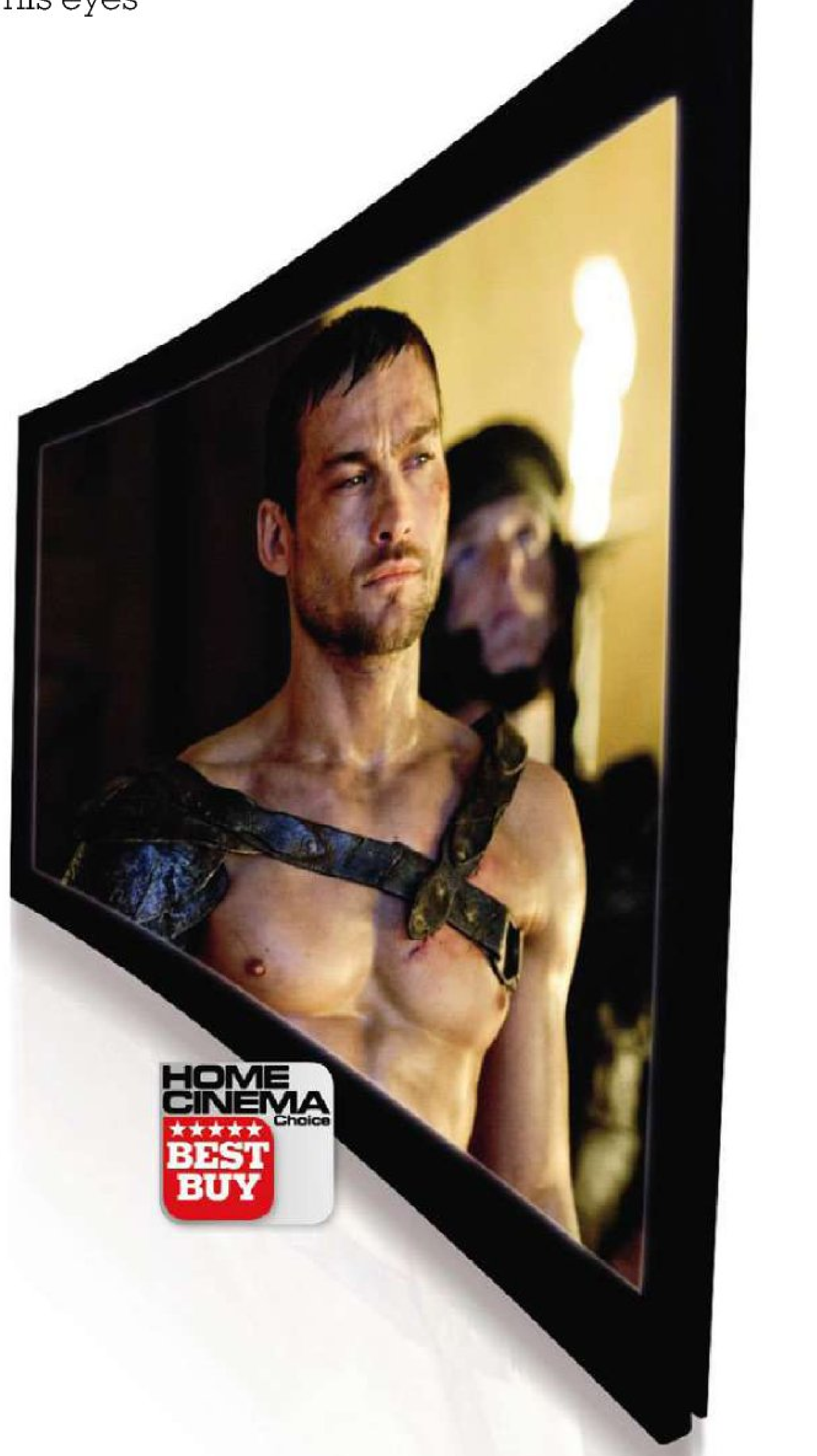
However, this finish immediately raises concern, because it reflects a noticeable strip of light along the barrel's underside when the screen is being used.

(We're now told that the RM2-T will be offered with a full velvet finish as an option – Ed.)

Motor home

After this slightly careless start, though, things improve fast. For a start, **the simple motorised mechanism for lowering and raising the screen works surprisingly smoothly and quietly for a unit in the RM2-T's price bracket**. What's more, once it's fully extended, it has enough tension to look as flat and 'solid' as a fixed frame screen.

It's good, too, to see the screen framed by a really light-absorbing black velvet border and fitted with a layer of black backing. This backing should play a crucial role in reducing the light let through (and thus



Hasta la Vista: Screen Excellence also offers the VistaCurve Cinemascope screen with EN4k fabric

AV/CV

Product: Acoustically transparent screen designed to match the pictures of solid, non-acoustic screens

Positioning: Top of the range

Peers: Screen Innovations Black Diamond II



'wasted') by the acoustically transparent screen's perforations.

Meanwhile, the 'weave' of the main 0.98 gain, matte white fabric is startlingly dense and smooth for an acoustically transparent screen. And since there's no easily discernible mesh or grid-like pattern in the fabric, no discernible screen structure shows up in the pictures, either.

Acid test

Using a trio of projectors – Epson's TW5500, JVC's X3 and Sony's VW90 – with various brightness outputs and source types, the RM2-T never once betrayed a hint of fabric screen structure from any sort of remotely sensible viewing distance.

This a considerable achievement for an acoustically transparent fabric that starts at around £1,800 for an 80in fixed screen version. Even some similarly priced 'solid' vinyl screens struggle to completely hide their structure from the picture.

Even better, there's not the slightest trace of *moiré* interference. This wavy line noise can occur with acoustically transparent screens when the rows and columns of pixels in a picture have a step size close to that of the fabric's perforation step or weave size. But the RM2-T's image is totally noise-free and natural, even when showing very bright images.

The fineness and solidity of the EN4K fabric suggests, indeed, that it probably will deliver on its '4k' claims, although I couldn't actually test this, given the current difficulties in finding 4k projectors and sources.

What I was able to test on the EN4K, though, was full HD alternate frame 3D footage. And the screen resolved *Avatar*'s extraordinary detail levels and perfect depth handling with seemingly effortless accuracy that was just superb.

Three-dimensional viewing does highlight a solitary EN4K 'weakness', as 3D images looked a touch darker and less punchy than they do on my reference solid (not acoustically transparent) screen. The slight loss of brightness created by the screen's acoustic transparency can also lead to colours looking marginally less vibrant, too. But hues are nonetheless very accurate in tone and extremely clean with it.

In fact, while a solid screen might give you a slightly brighter image, by the standards of acoustically transparent fabrics, especially affordable ones, the amount of light seeping right through the EN4K material is actually remarkably small, especially when you take into account how well it allows audio to permeate through from speakers mounted behind it. Screen Excellence claims the screen introduces just 2dB of audio loss, despite the density of its fabric, and to be honest, I struggled to detect any deterioration in the audio at all, using either my ears or measuring equipment.

Lightbulb moment

At this point, the full and potent appeal of the RM2-T suddenly becomes blindingly clear. From the way it balances picture quality and acoustic transparency while costing so relatively little, it makes a hugely attractive proposition for anyone wanting to put together a convenient, but also high-quality home cinema room without spending a fortune



Low light seepage: The tightly woven EN4K fabric is the secret ingredient to this screen's success

Specifications

HD Ready: ***YES*** happy showing stuff up to 4k and beyond
Gain: 0.98 neutral
Mounting options: Fixed frame; motorised RM2-T; Masking version; curved Cinemascope version
Max size without seam: 3m
Also featuring: Newly developed weave to simultaneously allow acoustic transparency and solid; motorised option with simple but effective tension system
Remote control: One button makes the screen go up; another makes it go down. Got that?

Here come the grills: The RM2-T never once revealed a trace of fabric structure



HCC VERDICT

Screen Excellence RM2-T, From £4,860 approx

Highs: Achieves a remarkable screen density for an acoustically transparent screen; very affordable
Lows: Light reflects onto the bottom of the top casing

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

AWARDS 2011 **HOME CINEMA CHOICE**

Store4Kegs.com

Hybrid theory works

A 3D Blu-ray player/ Freeview HD mashup that's got **Steve May's** vote



Blu-ray players are evolving. No longer is a straight HD upgrade to DVD enough to tempt cash-strapped buyers. We demand more from our kit; we want 3D, networking, rainbows and kittens.

And lo. As a great example of hybrid theory, Samsung is giving us the BD-D6900. The disc-spinning element of this deck is just one of many attractions; it also has a Freeview HD tuner, access to Samsung's Smart Hub IPTV and apps portal and can even double as a PVR (if you provide the hard drive).

The device has been designed to ape the brand's upmarket TV screens, being thin and shiny, with a centre-mounted, touch-sensitive display. The unit uses a slot-in drive and there's integrated wi-fi, too.

Accessing this feast of functions is easy via a lovely, hi-res menu system. From here you can jump to the Smart Hub, search your network for devices or watch and record TV. As stated, the BD-D6900 will record to an external USB drive. I hooked one up and it was good to go after being formatted.

DRM ensures recordings can only be played back on this unit. There is limited in-deck editing, though, such as dividing and partial deleting.

The Smart Hub portal looks much like it does on the brand's TVs. But there's no open web browser or Live TV window. Our review sample sported most of the key attractions: YouTube, DailyMotion, Facebook, Twitter, Picasa, Google Maps, Acetracks. There was no BBC iPlayer, but this may have been offline.

The unit is DLNA compliant, but network media streaming isn't entirely successful. Across my test network, it was unable to play MKV or MOVs. AVIs played albeit without SRT subtitles. Samsung optimises streaming from PCs rather than NAS products, so other users may have more success. The deck is at its best when playing files from a USB Flash drive, whereupon stubborn MKVs kick into action and AVIs do play back with subtitles.

3D converter

Blu-ray playback in both 2D and 3D I'd rate as fine for the cash. Pictures enjoy lavish levels of detail and noise is low. There's 2D-to-3D conversion for flat source material, and while this can be unpredictable with moving images, it creates a quite interesting effect on some digital stills. For what it's worth, I think Samsung has probably the best faux 3D conversion tech available.

However, I would only rate DVD upscaling as average, and as a CD player the BD-D6900 is best described as functional. Plumbed into a relatively high-end system, it really doesn't image that well. But then, it's not that kind of product.

Overall, the BD-D6900 is a pleasingly innovative release from Samsung. Those looking for a do-it-all 3D, HD and connected TV upgrade to their entertainment systems will find it uniquely appealing ●

Swiss army knife: Playing Blu-ray discs is just one of the BD-D6900's many functions

→ Specifications

3D: *YES* and 2D-3D conversion
Upscaling: *YES* to 1080p
Multiregion: *NO* Region B BD/R2 DVD
HDMI: *YES* x 1 v 1.4
Component: *YES* x 1
Multichannel analogue: *NO*
Digital audio: *YES* optical and coaxial digital outputs
SACD/DVD-A: *NO/NO*
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD decoding: *YES/YES*
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD bitstream: *YES/YES*
Profile 2.0: *YES*
Tuner: DVB-T2 Freeview HD
Memory: Records to external HDDs
Dimension: 430(w)x 255(d) x 33(h)mm

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts

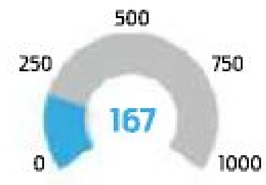


Idling: A fair figure for a machine with an integrated tuner



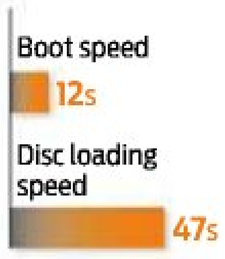
Powered: An increase of only 3W when spinning a disc

Audio Jitter: Ps



Sound: A good result audio jitter results that suggests a solid construction

Loading: Boot/Java



Disc loading & Java: Boot up takes you straight to the tuner, and is a little slow, but the slot loading mechanism is quick

HCC VERDICT

Samsung BD-D6900, £300 Approx

Highs: Generous feature spread; Smart Hub portal; good all-round performance

Lows: Can't record/browse the Smart Hub portal at the same time; unpredictable media streaming

Performance: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Design: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Features: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

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News

▶ Panasonic is taking television to the next level with the new VIERA NeoPlasma line-up, which delivers brilliant picture quality in Full HD 2D and 3D. Never miss a detail when watching movies, sports or playing the latest games. With NeoPlasma, you can always be sure to get the best picture quality.

▶ Onkyo's new TX-NR609 looks set to be another classic. This THX® Select2 Plus™ Certified A/V receiver handles content from all your favourite disc-based media, as well as networked and audio content from the internet including support for Spotify, iPod/iPhone, and PC. Six HDMI® inputs provide support for 3D video and ultra-high resolution 4K video upscaling plus master-quality audio formats and expanded surround sound.







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PANASONIC

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Panorama adds a whole new dimension to home entertainment, bringing truly immersive surround sound to your TV from a single, discreet speaker.







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SPEAKER PACKAGE

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RADIUS R90 HD10



BRONZE BX2 5.1



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Mini the Minx

Adrian Justins experienced the bite of this tiny terrier 5.1 sub/sat system

At first glance, the Minx looks no more remarkable than the speakers you get with an all-in-one home cinema system made by various Korean or Japanese mass market brands. But we need to look West rather than East in seeking a comparison: think Bose rather than Sony or LG and you get the idea.

Cambridge Audio reckons that Minx 'completely rewrites the rulebook of what's possible from miniature speakers'.

Build quality bodes well, with extractable banana sockets and a high-gloss lacquer finish applied to dinky little cabinets that are engineered from acoustically damped thermo polymer and extruded aluminium. Peeling off the grilles reveals a surprise: instead of domes and tweeters there are perfectly flat discs with rubber surrounds. Each driver has a hybrid flat-panel radiator mounted on a conventional rubber surround.

Here is Minx's unique selling point: its use of Balanced Mode Radiator (BMR) technology. These full range drivers – reaching the 20kHz limit of human hearing – use NXT-style 'bending wave' principles for higher frequencies and conventional pistonic driver movement for lower ones. According to CA, this results in a wider frequency response than similarly styled speakers with deeper and more powerful bass, plus broader sound dispersion.



Sexy little Minx: Cambridge Audio's new sub/sat system is cuteness overload

The company is certainly playing the lifestyle card here, and as well as black and white lacquer finishes, there are options for mounting, comprising the basic supplied wall bracket, a £15 pedestal stand and £80 floorstanders.

The Minx lineup comes in three 5.1 permutations, ranging from the Min 215 with single-driver satellites combined with a 200W subwoofer; or the twin-driver satellites hitched to their 300W sub and, finally, the same sats in tow with a 500W sub. My sample, the S325, uses the twin-dirver sats and the 300W woofer.

The sub looks classy and resplendent in gloss black and sits on solid rubberised feet. Like the sats, it takes an unconventional approach; behind a removable nylon grille is a forward-firing driver which combines with an downward-firing Auxiliary Bass Radiator (ABR). A bespoke DSP has been implemented to help deliver superior efficiency and enable a much smaller footprint than would normally be expected to deliver a claimed frequency response as low as 33Hz.

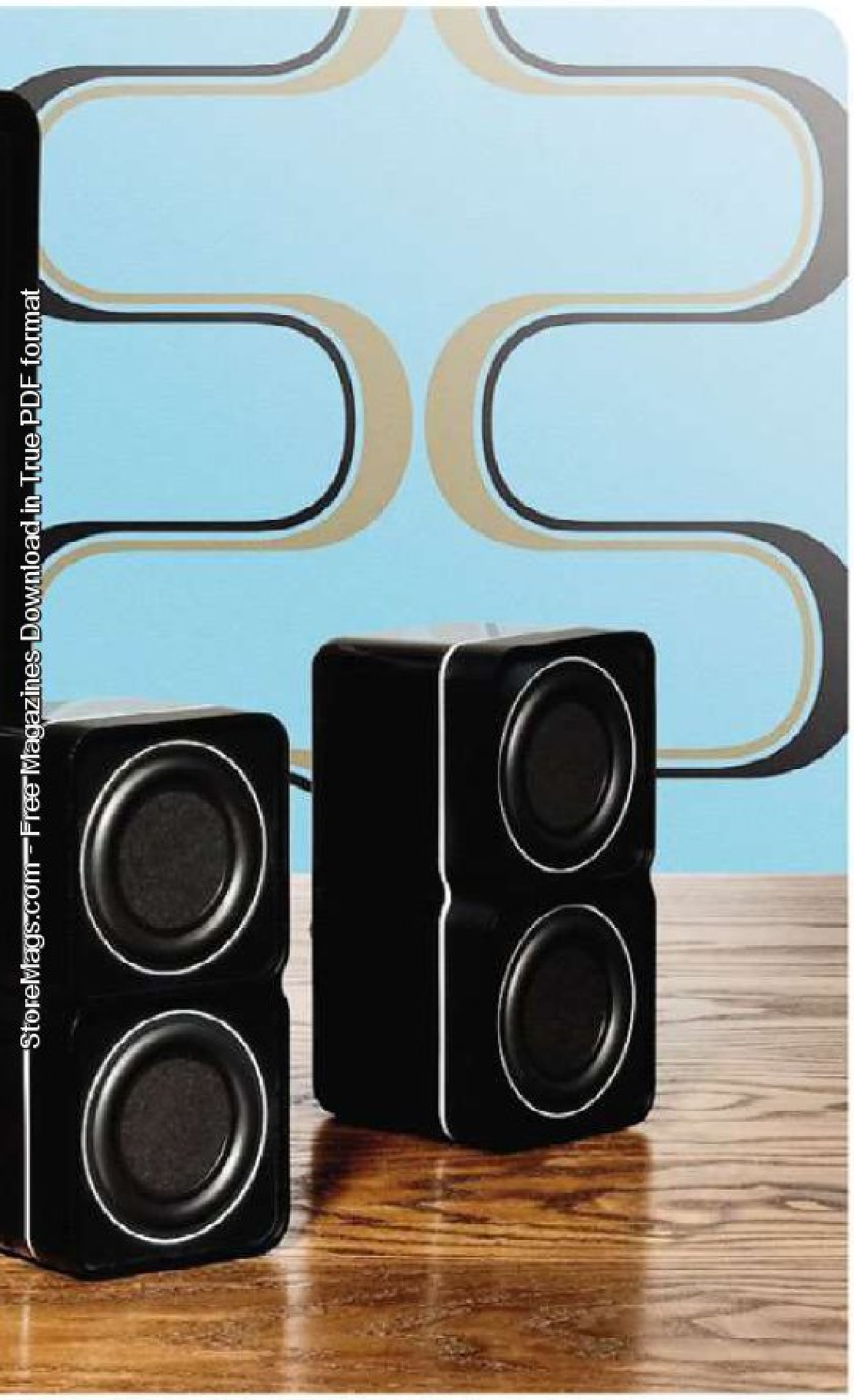
The rear panel offers control of gain, phase and crossover frequency and includes a line-out socket for adding a second sub. There's also a handy signal detection feature and a wireless port for removing the LFE input cable at some future stage.

AV/CV

Product: 5.1 sub/sat speaker system

Position: Mid-way between the S215 and S525 systems

Peers: Canton Movie CD 151; Q Acoustics 2000 series



Blow the doors off

Fired up, it soon becomes apparent that the Minx is indeed a remarkable system, but not an unqualified success. **The sub is an extraordinary beast, like a kitten with the lungs of a lion.** In the first chapter of *There Will Be Blood* on Blu-ray, Daniel Day-Lewis sets off an explosion that blew the grille off the sub. My fault for not fixing it tightly enough, but on a second serving I watched in amazement as my plasterboard walls reverberated. As the beautifully scored soundtrack reaches a crescendo you really feel the drama of the scene's climax is enhanced, as the bass seals the sense of excitement and fulfillment. Likewise, when The Thing shouts 'fine' on the Brooklyn Bridge in the *Fantastic Four*'s DTS-HD soundtrack. I had my shirt pressed back into my chest. As the truck exploded, the subwoofer gently flexed its LFE muscle and the room boomed in a purposeful, yet controlled, way.

But what of the satellites? They certainly seem to fill the room, exhibiting much more power than you'd expect and achieving that broad sound dispersion, but they do have an obvious flaw, which is that mid-to-higher frequencies tend to lack subtlety, while dialogue sounds cold and shrill as if it has come from a primitive, unrefined digital amplifier. Bigger noises, such as the fire engine crash in the *Fantastic Four,* screech an uncomfortable assault on the ears.

A quick spin of Jeff Buckley's *Real* was a similar experience; the sub and sats filled the room effortlessly, but the vocals remained deeply unsatisfactory and felt unreal.

Gorgeous

The S325 is certainly a remarkable product. This system can fill a room with an impressively broad soundstage, the sub would be a truly compelling proposition as a standalone product, and the whole package looks gorgeous. It's just a shame its upper frequency performances lacks refinement

Specifications

Min20 LCR and rears

Drive Units: 2 x 2.25in BMR cone drivers
Enclosure: Sealed
Frequency Response: 130Hz-20kHz
Sensitivity: 87dB (2.83Vrms)
Power Handling: 15-75W
Dimensions: 78(w) x 154(h) x 85(d)mm
Weight: 0.75kg

Minx X300 subwoofer

Drive Unit: 1 x 8in aluminium cone driver subwoofer; 1 x 8in aluminium cone driver passive radiator
Enclosure: Sealed
Frequency Response: 33Hz-200Hz
On board power: 300W RMS digital amp
Dimensions: 266(w) x 311(h) x 278(d)mm
Weight: 7.5kg



HCC VERDICT

Cambridge Audio Minx S325
£800 Approx

Highs: Classy finish; extraordinary power especially from the versatile sub; removable banana sockets
Lows: Shrill mid-to-high range frequencies; cold-sounding dialogue

Performance: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 3 **4** 5

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

AWARDS 2010 **HOME CINEMA CHOICE**

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Simplicity itself

If 3D is a complete turn-off and you just want a competent Blu-ray player that delivers great pictures, **Danny Phillips** has the perfect solution

Unsurprisingly, 3D will continue to dominate the home cinema agenda in 2011, with a flood of 3D-capable TVs and Blu-ray products hitting the market as the year unfolds. Indeed, Panasonic's new range of Blu-ray decks includes no fewer than four 3D-ready models.

But it's worth remembering that not everyone has the desire or the budget to embrace the 3D revolution, which is why Panasonic also provides a couple of non-3D models, including the DMP-BD75.

This entry-level player has been stripped of the headline-grabbing features of its 3D stable mates, its focus shifting to the brand's proven picture prowess, and given a lower price tag to match.

Little black number

Panasonic has made a concerted effort to downsize dimensions in order to reduce the amount of packaging, making the BD75 so slim you could almost slip it in your wallet. Art deco it's not, but the understated black styling is undeniably tasteful and the aluminium bodywork is surprisingly robust. Just a couple of buttons adorn the fascia, alongside a USB port in place of the usual SD card slot and a basic display panel.

The rear panel also screams 'entry level'. All you'll find there are HDMI, composite video and stereo audio outputs, which is pretty much all you need if you own an HDMI-equipped AV receiver. But those who need a separate digital audio output, or multichannel analogue ports, should look further up the range.

There's also an Ethernet port, which on Panasonic's more expensive players enables you to explore the new Viera Connect cloud internet service and Skype functionality, but here it's limited to DLNA networking (dubbed Media Server), BD-Live downloads and firmware updates. There's no wi-fi support at all, whether built-in or dongle-fed. Still, it's encouraging to see networking filtering down to even the cheapest players, as the ability to stream music, video, photos and recordings stored on DIGA recorders is always a bonus (even though you need a Windows 7 PC to use it).

The USB port on the front panel provides another way of playing digital media. As well as supporting the usual suspects – MP3, JPEG and DivX HD – it also handles MKV, but it didn't want to know our AAC, WMV or WMA files, plus, we could only hear the audio for AVI. The USB port is also used for storing downloaded BD-Live content, so if you're a regular downloader get used to having a USB stick protruding from the front.

The onscreen interface has also been given a new lick of paint for 2011, including a radical rethink of the

AV/CV

Product:
Profile 2.0 Blu-ray player

Positioning:
Entry-level player, one of two 2D decks in latest range

Peers:
Samsung BD-C5300; Toshiba BDX2100; Philips BDP3100



navigation system. While there was nothing hugely wrong with the brand's previous menus, this is a distinct improvement, even so, with the added immediacy and logic bringing it closer in spirit to Sony's Xross Media Bar.

Thin on features: DLNA networking is about the extent of advanced tools

Sign of the cross

Indeed, icons are laid out in a cross and the relevant menu is selected simply by hitting a direction key or Enter. The icons are cute and the colour scheme bright and bubbly. It's a dream to use and poses no problems when streaming, surfing media folders or tweaking the settings, amongst which is a bunch of picture presets and a user-defined mode where you can adjust colour, contrast, brightness and sharpness.

The remote takes an 'ain't broke don't fix it' approach, keeping the same compact shape, button layout and clear labelling as last year's zappers, while providing a dedicated button for the Media Server feature.

Panasonic has also shaved a chunk off last year's disc loading speeds: it gets *Terminator Salvation* from tray to play in 40 seconds, with less stubborn discs firing up in 30.

And **in terms of performance, the DMP-BD75 offers everything you expect from a Panasonic player, particularly when it comes to picture quality**. Its tried and trusted on-board image technology delivers deep, vivacious colours and sublimely sharp detail. It paints the lush high-definition landscapes of Pandora throughout *Avatar* with such intensity that you can't resist being pulled into the picture, and with close-up shots of faces or CG creatures the deck doesn't miss a single pixel.

On a more objective level, the Silicon Optix demonstrates what a smooth operator the DMP-BD75 really is, particularly for an entry-level deck. Neither the Film nor Video Resolution loss tests showed a single sign of strobing, the edges of the moving white bars on the jaggies test patterns are as smooth as a baby's bum, and the rows of seats during the pan across Raymond James Stadium look steady and composed.

HD audio soundtracks are as crisp as you'd expect over an HDMI connection, and our Tech Labs' analogue audio jitter test suggests it's a solid CD player too; although subjectively I thought performance was unspectacular.

Budget deficit

If you're in the market for a basic Blu-ray deck that serves up eye-popping pictures, and you have no need for bells and whistles, then you could do far worse than plump for the DMP-BD75. But most AV enthusiasts will surely be tempted by the more exciting treats offered higher up Panasonic's 2011 range. An extra £100 gets you built-in wi-fi, access to the Viera Connect portal and, of course, 3D playback

Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts

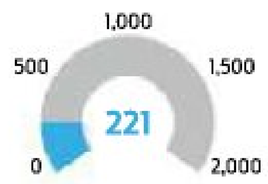


Idling: An excellent figure. Oddly, standby mode rated at 3W



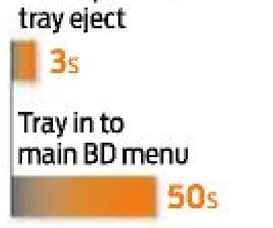
Playing: Even with a disc playing power use barely registers

Audio Jitter: ps



Analogue: A thoroughly-decent result for what is a budget player.

Loading: Boot/Java



Disc loading & Java: Brilliant boot time and respectable loading time with our test disc

Specifications

3D: NO Surprising, eh?
Upscaling: YES to 1080p
Multiregion: NO Region B BD/R2 DVD
HDMI: YES 1 x v1.3
Component: NO
Multichannel analogue: NO
Digital audio outputs: NO Via HDMI only
SACD/DVD-A: NO/NO
Dolby True HD/DTS HD decoding: YES/YES
Dolby True HD/DTS HD bitstream: YES/YES
Profile 2.0: YES
Dimensions: 430(w) x 35(h) x 185(d)mm
Weight: 1.6kg
Features: Ethernet; USB port; DivX HD, MKV, MP3, XviD, JPEG, AVCHD support; Net TV; DLNA certified; 1080/24p output; Deep Colour; x.v.Colour; 192kHz/24-bit audio DAC; Viera Link; picture presets and user settings



HCC VERDICT

Panasonic DMP-BD75
£110 Approx

Highs: Superb picture quality; DLNA networking; MKV support; improved onscreen displays and quicker disc loading
Lows: Basic spec; no memory or wi-fi; no AAC, WMV or WMA

Picture: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Sound: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Features: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Overall: 1 2 **3** 4 5

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Image is everything

Adam Rayner is surprised by a set of speakers that conform to a cosmetic brief, but still manage to sound awesome…

I cannot begin to understand those people for whom actual visible speaker cabinets – enclosures with loudspeaker drivers in them – are anathema. Personally, I love huge veneered boxes, shiny piano black monoliths and tweeters in sexy tapering tubes stuck on the top.

But sadly, there is the issue of sharing a film with others. It's like love-making versus self abuse; the former is far more fulfilling and one tries to please one's partner. Well, so I was told... WAF (Wife Acceptance Factor) therefore remains of huge importance in the speaker industry. So, while any Trekker worth his salt knows the 'laws of physics never take a holiday, Jim!', and that really superbly potent and sexy speakers require the *lebensraum* of cavernous boxes, we also find whole categories of speakers that try not to obtrude.

There are funny little things with a cross-section no bigger than a slice of Battenberg cake; skinny towers to match sylph-like tellies; blade-shaped stumps on wall brackets; and flattened speakers hidden behind prettily printed canvas, so they don't appear to be speakers at all.

The Image Audio set here fall into the latter category: wall-mountable flatpanel speakers covered in a designer grille. You choose the images you want from the company's wannabee Ikea selection, or you can pay an extra £25 per frame to use your own image.

Easy to hang

Called the 5, 8 and C, Image Audio's speakers have simple two-way designs and are ported cunningly. The boxes look basic yet are as clever as weasels. For one, they have two-piece, spring-steel wall brackets. One bit goes on the wall, the other is well-fixed to the rear and as the two marry up when you hang them, they use the weight of the speaker itself to secure the box really firmly onto the rear Neoprene gaskets that isolate them from the walls.

Inside, they are well braced, and have some splodgy secret that absorbs the massive back wave from the driver (where it is so very close to the woodwork) and stops any bad effects from there.

More importantly, the drivers are crafted by Morel, a company which makes some of the very best in the world and are universally acclaimed.

These run on passive crossovers using sexy capacitors of the sort adored by hi-fi nutters. Image Audio's designer was not aiming at merely AV, he was aiming at studio monitoring, as he has done his whole career. So as R&D progressed, Image Audio went ever further into the zone, while perhaps never realising just how unique this made the product, or just how bonkers high-end the sound it was getting. Or maybe IA simply thought that was the only standard to go for. Upon

Image to suit: You can specify your own design for the grille, or choose from IA's catalogue



HOME CINEMA CHOICE AWARDS 2011

audition (at Image Audio's UK headquarters), any lingering preconceptions I had entertained about hidden wall-mounted speakers were quickly and thoroughly dispelled.

I was played a clip from Spielberg's *War of The Worlds* and sat slack jawed. **I was prepared to make allowances for the cabinetry, but the sheer levels of detail, resolution, clarity and purity were just astonishing**. As the Martians ray-gunned the place, the voices in all directions, be they querulous and quiet or distant and shouting, were all presented with accuracy that was hard to credit.

Not only that but the two weightless droplets of water coalescing in front of Jake Sully's face as he wakes from Cryosleep have never 'plipped' with greater delicacy and rarity. It was a great precursor to the hugeness and epic scale of Cameron's opening sequence for *Avatar* – which the Image Audios played without breaking sweat.

I should point out that for sub-bass we used a 10in MJ Acoustics Reference 100. This was crossed over pretty low, as the IA 8s reached down well below the regular crossover point of an active subwoofer with ease.

It must be love

These Image Audio speakers are easy to love. I found myself comparing this delicious experience not with other panel style speakers, but with true high-end offerings in big boxes, designed with clever baffles and sculpted sections. The drivers in these boxes and the cleverness of the IA design, has added up to a virtuoso home cinema product.

So, I'll take Stonehenge in a ruddy dawn for the rears, and monochrome Liberty, Eiffel and Big Ben for the fronts, please...

AV/CV

Product: On-wall speakers with picture frame finishes

Position: Currently Image Audio's sole speaker range

Peers: PICS by Vibe; Artcoustic; Suono Solo



Specifications

Image Audio IA 8

Drive Units: 1 x 8in Morel Hexatech driver with double magnet and 75mm voice coil; 1 x 1.25in Morel Hextatech tweeter
Enclosure: Two-way ported with Neoprene wall seal. Equipped with two-piece steel wall-compression bracket and internal damping for rear wave of bass driver
Frequency Response: 43Hz-25kHz +/-6dB
Sensitivity: 89dB (2.83V @ 1m)
Power Handling: 150W RMS
Dimensions: 520(w) x 622(h) x 110(d) mm (inc grille)
Weight: 14.8kg

Image Audio IA C Centre

Drive Units: 2 x 5.25in Morel Hexatech drivers; 1 x 1.25in Morel Hextatech tweeter
Enclosure: Two-way ported
Frequency Response: 67Hz-25kHz +/-6dB
Sensitivity: 88dB (2.83V @ 1m)
Power Handling: 300W
Dimensions: 1010(w) x 212(h) x 110(d) mm (inc grille)
Weight: 13.8kg

Image Audio IA 5 Surround

Drive Units: 1 x 5.25in Morel Hexatech driver; 1 x 1.25in Morel Hextatech tweeter
Enclosure: Two-way ported
Frequency Response: 45Hz to 25kHz +/-6dB
Sensitivity: 88dB (2.83V @ 1m)
Power Handling: 150W RMS
Dimensions: 394(w) x 494(h) x 102(d) mm (inc grille)
Weight: 11.1kg

HCC VERDICT

Image Audio IA 8/5/C package
£4,000 Approx

Highs: Superb sound with nil acoustic compromise; excellent picture choice; custom finish option
Lows: They use some of the best transducers available worldwide, so they are not cheap

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

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Stereo.gg.com

Armchair theatre

Looking for an old-school disc spinner built for high-end AV? **Steve May** thinks Onkyo has it nailed with this offering

This THX-certified player has purpose. Designed from the rivets up to be nothing less than a bad-ass home theatre disc spinner, it's the designated driver for the brand's current line up of THX AV receivers and pre/power PR-SC5508/PA-MC5500 combo.

It doesn't hold much truck with 3D or IPTV network portals and that's the point: it's all about movies and music. Think of the Onkyo BD-SP808 as the bastard offspring of Harry Knowles and Katherine Jenkins.

Build quality is outstanding, with good old-fashioned attention to detail. The player has a solid machined fascia and rigid cover, ensuring that unwarranted resonances and wobbles just don't get a look in. The drive mechanism has been centre-mounted, for all the right reasons.

The front fascia offers up an SD card slot and a fairy-tree assortment of status lights. On the rear is an HDMI v1.3 output, component jacks, phono video out (answers on a postcard if you can think of any possible use for this), digital coax and optical audio ports, and Ethernet. With an eye to the custom install market, there's also an RS232 port, and IR input/output jacks if you want to operate the player to feed a secondary zone, but the unit is out of range of the supplied handset. However, you can use an IR relay from the likes of Xantech to control it.

AV/CV

Product:
THX certified Blu-ray player with audiofile build quality

Positioning:
The step-up BD player that sits above the £180 BD-SP308

Peers:
Cambridge Audio Azur 650BD; Harman Kardon BDP10

Clearly, the player isn't a Fancy Dan. Once powered up, the welcome screen is bleak and offers only a discreet invite to scour your connected home network. I accepted its terse invitation and seconds later was looking at my server list; all storage devices were found and accounted for, including my dedicated music server. A couple more clicks and I'm rocking to the OST of Wes Craven's *Shocker* (what can I say? I like it!). It's worth noting that it can take a little time for the SP808 to read the contents of a NAS – it all depends on how much material is on it.



Store.hcc.com

MP3 and WMA music playback is fairly rudimentary. There's no provision to display album art, with just a numerical list of tracks being the sum total of presentation on offer. At least you can navigate quickly using the colour keys on the remote. Needless to say, the player doesn't support FLAC, OGG or other esoteric formats. Extraneous video support basically extends to AVCHD played from SD card.

Standard bearer

For a Blu-ray player, the SP808 is surprisingly adept with standard-definition DVD. The opening sequence to *Shakespeare in Love* (Superbit Edition), featuring the slow spiral down into the Rose theatre, is rendered beautifully with no stepping or jaggies when upscaled to 1080p. Indeed, **the player passes all the deinterlacing tests on Silicon Optic's HQV DVD evaluation disc with flying colours**.

The Onkyo's native HD output is equally sweet, with exquisite fine detail. There's little overt video noise, so textures shine through; skin tones and glinting metal alike are totally convincing. The result is a supremely cinematic image.

If your AV receiver is getting a little long in the tooth, it might be worth letting the SP808 do a lossless audio conversion to multichannel PCM. The player employs a 192 kHz/24-bit Audio DAC that is well above average, and its multichannel PCM output is seductively smooth.

Similarly, for CD playback, I would advocate using the analogue stereo output rather than the HDMI connection. I laced the deck up so that I could select CD to listen to this feed *sans* video (keeping the HDMI feeds separate for home theatre use) and was delighted at the result. The output stage is custom-built by Onkyo and it shines.

Overall, the BD-SP808 is a class act with a pure AV heart. While it's an undoubted shame that the deck is not compatible with Super Audio CDs or DVD-A discs, and has shonky multimedia file support, its overall performance is accomplished. Perhaps Onkyo should consider a Universal solution with its next Blu-ray outing, rather than just being predictable and throwing its lot in with the 3D crowd?

Overall, the BD-SP808 is a 'must audition', especially for owners of related Onkyo THX kit

Hard as nails: Unlike budget BD decks, the BD-SP808 is solidly built



Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts

Idling: Not as low as many budget players

Playing: Has a lot of power-hungry electronics inside



Audio Jitter: ps

Analogue: An excellent result, in the same class as high-end CD players

Loading: Boot/Java



Disc loading & Java: While quick to power up from standby, it's rather slow to load

Specifications

3D: *NO*
Upscaling: *YES* to 1080p
Multiregion: *YES* RegionB BD/R2 DVD
HDMI: *YES* one v1.3
Component: *YES* one
Multichannel analogue: *NO*
Digital audio: *YES* optical and coaxial digital outputs
SACD/DVD-A: *NO/NO*
Dolby True HD/DTS HD decoding: *YES/YES*
Dolby True HD/DTS HD bitstream: *YES/YES*
Profile 2.0: *YES*
Dimensions: 430mm(w) x 108mm(h) x 321mm(d)
Weight: 5kg
Features: Ethernet; DLNA 1.5 rated; SD card slot; Marvell Qdeo video-processing; independent circuit blocks for audio, digital video, and analogue video; RS232 port; IR input and output

HCC VERDICT

Onkyo BD-SP808
£500 Approx

Highs: Superb build quality; THX certified; excellent video performance; entertaining CD player
Lows: Lacklustre user interface; limited media file support; generic remote control

Picture: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Sound: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

AWARDS 2011 **HOME CINEMA CHOICE**

Back with a bang

Virgin Media has brought TiVo back to the UK in its latest set-top box. **Mark Craven** goes goggle-eyed with excitement



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Revamped: VM TiVo sports an elegant curved design

AV/CV

Product: Triple tuner 1TB PVR with 'smart' software

Positioning: Top of Virgin Media's cable box lineup – next down is a 500GB model

Peers: Sky+HD

I love my Sony PlayStation 3. So much so that a while ago, I decided that if my house was burning down, it would be the first thing I'd save (after the cat, of course). The rest of my AV gear, including flatscreen TV, receiver, speaker system, Xbox 360 and regular Blu-ray player could melt in a gloss-black pyre. As far I was concerned, my BD-deck-cum-games-console-cum-media jukebox was more precious. Yet now, with Virgin Media's new TiVo-powered set-top box plumbed into my system, the PS3's position as hardware *numero uno* is looking increasingly precarious.

In fact, I'm happy to admit that Virgin Media's flagship cable box has radically altered the way I watch TV. Where I once wasted hours of my week trudging around the EPG and VOD menus looking for interesting programmes, I now sit smugly, while my set-top box does all the hard work, bringing me juicy content like an obedient dog retrieving a stick. This is extraordinarily cool.

But first, back to basics. Virgin Media powered by TiVo (its full title), is the new, top-of-the-range service offered by the UK cablecaster. It's available to anyone living within a Virgin Media cable area, which the company claims is around half the UK's homes, but as detailed in *HCC* #194, can be a bit of a postcode lottery (check Virgin Media's website to see if your address is covered.)

Getting the box isn't cheap. Pricing for new customers is £200, plus installation, and you need to subscribe to VM's TV XL package. Existing customers can get one for £150. VM has been taking pre-orders for a few months now, too, so there could be a delay getting one installed.

A 500GB box was announced just before we went to press, available to all VM TV (not just XL) subscribers, and at a cost of just £50.

Style upgrade

VM TiVo offers many improvements over V+HD, but I'll start on the outside. Gone is the double-decker bus form factor, replaced with a slim, elegantly curved unit and a far less chunky remote control. It's also quieter in use. While V+HD whirred and clicked so much it was like having two mice playing ping pong in your living room, VM TiVo is assassin-quiet.

Under the hood, things are different, too. The HDD has been increased to 1TB, which equates to storage space for around 400hours of standard-def TV and 100hours of hi-def. The implementation of the three tuners has also been tweaked. With V+HD you could record two channels while watching a third, but now you can record three channels at once, while watching a recording. Even better, the tuners can be used for multiple buffering of live TV, allowing you to switch between three channels and pause/rewind/fast-forward each of them. It's trickplay TV on steroids.

Various recording options include prioritising shows to avoid clashes, adding repeats to Series Links, extending recordings of live shows that run over time, and activating recordings remotely via your phone or the web.

Lurking inside the Cisco-made box is also a dedicated modem, meaning the VM TiVo box can suck on net-delivered content without impacting on your home's own broadband feed.

So far, so good. But it's not the hardware changes that make VM TiVo as cool as a dead polar bear, it's the all-new GUI and software.

You see, **Virgin Media TV XL customers have long had the best catch-up TV and VOD offerings available**, but under the old V+HD regime actually finding what you wanted to watch was sometimes a bit of a chore. Too much choice made it hard to actually choose. Sensibly, VM has realised this, and called upon legendary US PVR brand TiVo to overhaul its system. So now, just like the original, much-revered TiVo service, your cable box learns your viewing likes and dislikes and brings content to you.

Of course, it doesn't do this by magic. You have to put in some groundwork by rating content under a simple Thumbs Up/Thumbs Down system. Once you've begun 'thumbing' programmes, VM TiVo then gets to work, firstly, by recording shows that it thinks you will enjoy to the hard drive (but never at the expense of one of your own scheduled recordings) and by highlighting programmes in the home menu's 'discovery' bar. If it suggests something you don't like, just thumb it down and it (almost certainly) won't do it again.

Even if you can't be bothered to thumb content, VM TiVo will make suggestions based on shows you have chosen to record.

After a few weeks, my box seems >

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to have a got a good grip on what I enjoy. There have been a few bumps along the way (just because I like *Red Dwarf* doesn't mean I like *Doctor Who*, okay?) but generally, everything VM TiVo has recorded has been up my street. And it's helped me keep up with what's on TV.

For instance, I only discovered a new series of *Russell Howard's Good News* had started on BBC Three because it appeared on my hard drive one morning. As someone who never reads a TV guide (face it, who does these days?), this is very useful.

In fact, so innately clever is VM's version of 'push' TV that I've actually been late to work because I've felt compelled to check My Suggestions before I leave the house.

TiVo on tap: Virgin Media's new remote features the Thumbs Up/ Thumbs Down buttons

Search me

Working alongside the Thumbs Up/Down system is a new powerful search and browse function that uses extensive metadata to help find the content you want; type in Jason Statham and it will point you towards anything the muscles from, er, Chesterfield is in, whether it's available on VOD, or on a forthcoming broadcast. If you want, you can then set up a 'Wishlist' search, so VM TiVo will continually hunt for Statham material from now on – and automatically record it, too.

And it's not just actors and directors you can set wishlists for: I've got a 'pork' keyword search set up, so VM TiVo is now recording cookery programmes which feature my favourite meat. Sad, but true.

The search function is also linked to another feature making its first appearance on the VM platform, YouTube. The video upload site is one of a small selection of apps currently available including eBay, Twitter and Weather. These reside in a dedicated Apps menu, but YouTube access pops up all over the VM TiVo interface, serving up clips related to what you're watching.

Apps scheduled to appear in the future include Facebook, Flickr and Picasa.

There are other new features and improvements that I simply don't have space to explain, but one that does deserve special mention is the backwards EPG, which lets you go back in time, sort of.

Why would you want to see what was on TV last Wednesday? Because anything which features a circled 'C' logo on the EPG is available to watch via catchup. Neat.

Picture quality is subjectively identical to the V+HD service – ie. perfectly fine. It varies depending on what channel you're watching, naturally, but turn to any native HD content on the growing number of hi-def channels and your're rewarded with sharp, stable pictures.

I have also noticed fewer instances of the box momentarily freezing up than I did with V+HD.

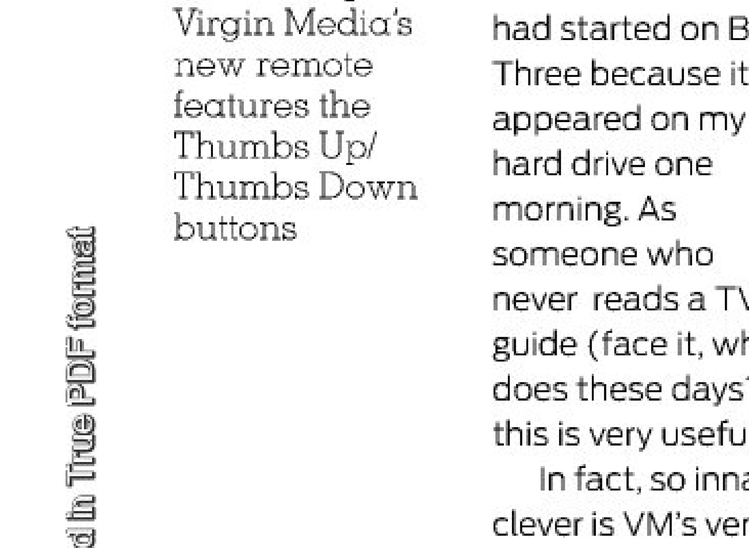
Work in progress

Of course, VM TiVo isn't 100 per cent perfect. During my audition process I encountered a couple of minor niggles and one major one...

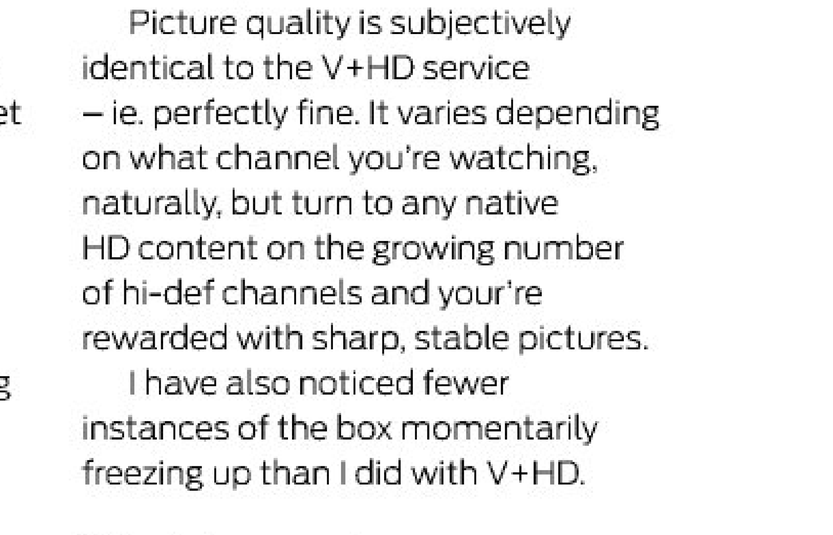
Firstly, **while the GUI is sleek, colourful, quick and beautifully hi-res, some of the sub menus aren't as lavishly decorated.**

For instance, the Wishlist Search portion looks like it's been designed in another century, with much larger

Colour correction: The old V+HD interface (**A**) has been replaced by a new full-colour GUI with cover art (**B**)







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Specifications

Tuner: YES 3 x DVB-C
HDD: YES 1 TB
HDMI: YES 1 x output
Digital audio: YES 1 x optical output
Scart: YES 1 output
Dimensions: 370(w) x 65(h) x 240(d)mm
Weight: NA
Features: Thumbs Up/Thumbs Down 'smart PVR' functionality; 14-day (forwards) and 7-day backwards EPG; extensive VOD/CatchUp; apps including YouTube, eBay and Twitter; search and browse; Series link; pause, rewind live TV; buffering of up to three tuners

Back up plan: There are transport controlson the front fascia, but I doubt you'll ever use them

fonts and a text-only interface. I hope VM can polish these up, but seeing as it's using third-party software, that may be harder than it should be. The official company line at the moment is: 'TiVo is an evolving service so expect new updates and enhancements as it evolves.'

Secondly, I noticed some metadata on on-demand content failing to correspond to the actual programme. This isn't a major gripe, but reading the description of an episode of hit comedy *Not Going Out* and being served up an entirely different episode altogether, isn't ideal.

Thirdly, the operating system takes some getting used to, especially if you've been a V+HD owner. Personally, I love it, and like the multiple ways you can choose to navigate yourself to the same area. On the other hand, my wife has, on occasion, threatened to throw the remote control down the toilet when she's been unable to do something in the way she was used to.

Lastly – and this is the real gripe – the BBC's Red Button service has gone AWOL. For some people this will mean nothing, as the teletext service has been stripped so thin it's barely worth bothering with, but sports fans will know it's where the Beeb frequently houses additional sports coverage, including F1 Grand Prix pre-qualifying rounds, Wimbledon, Open Golf and international football tournaments. And, although we would expect this service to appear shortly (it's still present on VM's other set-top boxes), we haven't yet managed to get confirmation.

Despite these grumbles, I'm still happy to award the VM TiVo box the full five stars. It's an unrivalled piece of home entertainment hardware. Sky may broadcast a more satisfying range of content in terms of 3D, sports and movies, but Virgin Media outmuscles it both in terms of VOD/catchup material and usability. The TiVo-driven interface makes watching TV fun again, and the triple tuner/1TB HDD combo is a timeshifters' dream.

Ultimate upgrade

If you already have V+HD, you should be upgrading to this (or perhaps the more affordable 500GB version) as soon as possible. And if you live in a Virgin Media cable area, but aren't currently a subscriber, I'd give it serious thought.

After all, there aren't many lumps of metal and plastic around that give you a warm, fuzzy feeling, but this one does...

Screen: The grid-based EPG (**C**) allows you to 'go back in time, while the Discovery Bar (**D**) is used to suggest movies and shows. The search function (**E**) lets you drill down into content metadata







HCC VERDICT

Virgin Media Powered by TiVo
From £150 (+subs)

Highs: Triple tuner 1TB PVR is best in class; innovative search/wishlist/suggestions features
Lows: Complex user interface takes time to learn; no BBC 'Red Button' at present

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

AWARDS 2011 **HOME CINEMA CHOICE**

ADVERTISEMENT

THE TOP 20



> "..the majority of home cinema systems selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level."

Choosing a home cinema system is a potential minefield that must be negotiated with great care or safely avoided by letting experts guide you. If you want to end up with a system that, as a minimum, meets your expectations in terms of picture and sound quality, reading magazine product reviews and choosing the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys can only ever be part of the answer at best. Looking for the cheapest price and having a system delivered to your door, even with a 'knowledgeable' friend to help set it up, is a well-trodden path to disappointment.

There is a bewildering choice of components on the market today and also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D? Full 1080p capability is now the only sensible choice but the appropriate source components, such as a Blu-ray player, need to be part of the equation. The sound performance of a system is also hugely important, even more so if you will be listening to music, or music DVD's, through the same system. If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Having an amp with the right inputs for the best connectivity is essential but you will also need to decide on a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub and, crucially, where they will be sited for the best results. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

ACHIEVING POTENTIAL

To select a system, you could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that they will be a great combination. Maybe, but probably not. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer. This is almost certainly not the best route either as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that **the majority of home cinema systems selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level.** To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity.

Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.

WHAT AND WHERE TO BUY

To ensure a home cinema system is right for you, where do you start? Here's an important tip ...**don't** start with **WHAT**, start with **WHERE**. There's only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. It's possible you have preconceived ideas that put you off visiting one. Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell expensive gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. They're expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit **you**.

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StereoKage.com

GUIDE TO BUYING HOME CINEMA

LISTED BELOW ARE 20 OF THE BEST AV SHOPS IN THE COUNTRY.

They have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

BUYING OR BEING SOLD TO?

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a carefully selected group of long-established specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy.

The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

GETTING THE BEST DEAL

Unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a far better way of doing business than just handing over boxes.

OUR TOP 20 UK SPECIALIST AV DEALERS

SOUTH

Chelmsford RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION
216 Moulsham Street. 01245 265245
www.rayleighhifi.com

Colchester RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION
33 Sir Isaac's Walk. 01206 577682
www.rayleighhifi.com

Kingston-upon-Thames INFIDELITY
9 High Street, Hampton Wick.
020 8943 3530
www.infidelity.co.uk

Maidenhead AUDIO VENUE
36 Queen Street. 01628 633995
www.audiovenue.com

Rayleigh, Essex RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION
44a High Street. 01268 779762
Custom Install Dept.
01268 776932
www.rayleighhifi.com

Southend-on-Sea RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION
132/4 London Road. 01702 435255
www.rayleighhifi.com

Tunbridge Wells KENT HOME CINEMA
69 London Road, Southborough.
01892 535007
www.kenthomecinema.co.uk

LONDON

Ealing AUDIO VENUE
27 Bond Street. 020 8567 8703
www.audiovenue.com

N1 GRAHAMS HI-FI
190a New North Road. 020 7226 5500
www.grahams.co.uk

SW11 ORANGES & LEMONS
61-63 Webbs Road, Battersea.
020 7924 2040
www.oandlhifi.co.uk

MIDLANDS

Coventry FRANK HARVEY HI-FI EXCELLENCE
163 Spon Street. 024 7652 5200
www.frankharvey.co.uk

Nottingham CASTLE SOUND & VISION
48/50 Maid Marian Way. 0115 9584404
www.castlesoundvision.com

Solihull MUSIC MATTERS
93-95 Hobs Moat Road. 0121 742 0254
www.musicmatters.co.uk

NORTH

Chester ACOUSTICA
17 Hoole Road. 01244 344227
www.acoustica.co.uk

York SOUND ORGANISATION
2 Gillygate. 01904 627108
www.soundorg.co.uk

SCOTLAND

Aberdeen HOLBURN HI-FI
441 Holburn Street. 01224 585713/572729
www.holburnhifi.co.uk

Glasgow GLASGOW AUDIO
135 Great Western Road.
0141 332 2200/4707
www.glasgowaudio.com

CEDIA® BADA the symbol of security

The majority of the above dealers are members of one or both of the major trade organisations, BADA or CEDIA.

STAR QUALITIES

VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
SERVICE	★★★★★
FACILITIES	★★★★★
VERDICT	★★★★★

TOP 20 UK SPECIALIST HOME ENTERTAINMENT DEALERS

QUALITY ASSURED ★★★★★

Stereo4kgs.com

AV/CV

Product: Value-led 5.1 speaker system

Position: Entry-level column system, pricier 300 and 900 systems available

Peers: Crystal Acoustics BPS-10; Klipsch HD Theater 100; Pioneer HTP200

The tallboy speakers can be swapped for smaller fronts and rears if you lack the headroom



Lofty high-risers

Danny Phillips has his cockles warmed by this affordable set of floorstanding speakers and unusually capable subwoofer

Compact bookshelf speakers are all well and good if you don't have much space, but for bigger, bolder home cinema thrills you've no choice but to make room for a decent set of floorstanders.

While that would normally mean upping your budget, Teufel is in the business of delivering maximum bang for minimum buck, and this column-based system can be yours for a wallet-friendly price.

Columa 100 is the baby of the range, which also includes the £490 Columa 300 and £1,060 Columa 900. This set comprises four identical 109cm-high speakers for the fronts and rears, the CL 100 C centre and a powered sub that kicks out 100W of bass. But if you get a last-minute pang of guilt over how much space the columns are taking up, you can substitute the fronts, rears or both for shorter 35mm-high satellites. But we're going for the Full Monty column system here.

The design of the titular columns is a break from the norm, thanks to the seductive gloss-black finish and a curvy back end that provides an elegance missing from some of Teufel's high-end speakers. At 8.6cm deep, they're a lot shallower than your average floorstanders, and when mounted on the oval bases they really are a sight for sore eyes. Don't expect the same tank-like build quality as Teufel's pricier packages, but at this price I'm not complaining.

On the back you'll find gold-plated binding posts, but their location inside a small recess makes it quite tricky to feed cables into the holes. Inside each column are a pair of all-new Klippel-optimised 2.75in midrange drivers and a 0.75in tweeter, with an optimised crossover pulling the frequency strings.

The same drivers can be found inside the CL 100 C centre.

The best part of the sub is the front-mounted power button, which could be a blessing if it's installed with its back to the wall, although with Auto power on board you shouldn't need to use it.

A couple of controls are provided on the back to get the sub singing in harmony with the other speakers – a volume dial and a switch that flips the phase 180º.

In action Columa 100 delivers the sort of sound you'd expect for the money; an enthusiastic, detailed performance that warms the cockles, but can't muster the power, insight and evenness provided by sister systems.

Telltale signs

During *Inception*, the opening scenes are a riot of well-placed effects such as the crack of falling timber and the rush of flood water. But there's a hint of brightness behind some of these effects at loud volumes that betrays the budget price tag, such as the clink of shells discharging from a gun or glass hitting the floor as Ariadne smashes the mirror. Better than the vast majority of all-in-one systems, mind you, but still unpolished.

Meanwhile, the centre channel's dialogue handling is assured and easily cuts through busy action scenes, but the star of the show is the sub, which delivers the sort of punch and agility you'd expect in a much pricier package. With a bit of tweaking, it blends with the columns beautifully, working its magic without grabbing too much attention.

And the rear speakers' ability to express subtle ambience and project louder effects creates an open, engaging rear soundfield. Columa also has a keen ear for music, with a crisp, rhythmic presentation of CDs and SACDs. That, along with the generally enjoyable movie performance and good looks, makes Columa 100 well worth a look

Specifications

CL 100 FCR fronts/rears

Drive units: 2 x 2.75in midrange drivers; 1 x 0.75in fabric tweeter
Enclosure: Closed, PVC
Frequency response: 120Hz-20kHz
Sensitivity: Not given
Power handling: 100W
Dimensions: 162(w) x 350(h) x 86(d)mm
Weight: 1.4kg

CL 100 C centre

Drive units: 2 x 2.75in midrange drivers; 1 x 0.75in fabric tweeter
Enclosure: Closed, PVC
Frequency response: 120Hz-20kHz
Sensitivity: Not given
Power handling: 100W
Dimensions: 350(w) x 171(h) x 103(d)mm
Weight: 1.5kg

US 5108/1 subwoofer

Drive units: 8in cellulose woofer
Enclosure: Bass reflex
Frequency response: Down to 38Hz
On board power: 100W
Dimensions: 240(w) x 420(h) x 365(d)mm
Weight: 12.8kg
Connections: Phono line level input



HCC VERDICT

Teufel Columa 100
£350 Approx

Highs: Great value; curvaceous design; crisp, energetic sound; excellent subwoofer
Lows: Some brightness; fiddly binding posts

Performance: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 **3** 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

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Finishing touches

Adrian Justins trawls the shelves for those must-have home cinema extras



KEF UNIVERSAL WIRELESS SYSTEM

Approx £450

Connecting a pair of surround speakers without trailing cables across a room is the main benefit of KEF's wi-fi system, but it can also be used to deliver CD-quality sound from PCs and MP3 players over the airwaves. It consists of a transmitter with a 3.5mm standard audio jack and two 50W, mains-powered receiving units, which sport binding-post speaker terminals for outputting the final leg of the audio relay. Use of a narrow signal band couples with advanced error correction technology to ward off unwanted interference, while Advanced Frequency Hopping Spread Spectrum imperceptibly changes channels to keep the signal stable.

www.kef.com

HCC VERDICT

Almost too stylish to banish behind the sofa



OMNIMOUNT NCLP SERIES

Approx £70

With TV screens getting ever thinner, the pressure is on to make suitably complementary wall mounts. Thus, from the Omnimount stable emerges the ultra-slim NCLP series that can mount a screen within 14mm of a wall. A key benefit is the latest incarnation of the brand's Lift n' Lock feature, which allows a screen to be attached to the mount and the level adjusted with ease. Other features include sliding lateral on-wall adjustment and an open-architecture design that provides ease of access to in-wall wiring.

www.omnimount.com

HCC VERDICT

More reliable than a hard wall picture hook

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PHILIPS DS9800 SOUNDSPHERE

Approx £700



Philips has updated the look of its unusual SoundSphere speakers and combined them with a revised Fidelio iPod dock that incorporates Apple's Airplay. The latter enables streaming direct from iTunes 10.1 or later, plus iPhone, iPad or iPod Touch with iOS 4.2 or later. The speakers' curved rigid cabinets place the tweeters at a distance from the other speaker components, thereby leaving them free from vibration and other resonance. Philips reckons that this creates a clear, uncoloured sound with an extra wide soundstage.

www.philips.co.uk

HCC VERDICT

Gorgeous to look at – but not kind to the piggy bank



FREELOADER CLASSIC SOLAR CHARGER

Approx £40

A back-up power source that feeds off the sun's rays can be a useful solution to the problem of a dying battery while watching a movie on a portable media player. The latest Freeloader boasts a 1200mAh environmentally-friendly Li-ion battery and sports a built-in LCD data panel, which provides useful information about battery level, power input and connectivity. It takes eight hours of unfettered sunshine to charge (about three weeks in the UK then) or cheats can cut the time to three hours by using a PC. The unit comes supplied with nine connector tips including the new micro USB, and features a standard USB socket for hooking up to iPads and the like.

www.solartechnology.co.uk

HCC VERDICT

Handy for the Northern Line and the North Pole alike

TANGENT ALIO

Approx £250

Looking resplendently retro in Ferrari red (but also available in gloss white or black and walnut veneer) the Alio combines an iPod dock with CD deck and FM radio. Measuring just 13.5cm high, it will happily sit on a shelf or bedside table. Tangent claims the Alio's loudness and equaliser pre-sets combined with its ceiling-facing 10W speaker deliver a level of performance normally associated with larger products. Music format includes compatibility with MP3 and WMA on CD-Rs and RWs, plus there's an aux line input. The large, four-line LCD display, at the centre of the front panel, features adjustable brightness to avoid glare, plus a dual alarm function.

www.tangent-audio.com

HCC VERDICT

Why no DAB? It's not perfect, but has its uses



Clips...

Small items that will make a big difference to your system

Belkin Conserve Valet

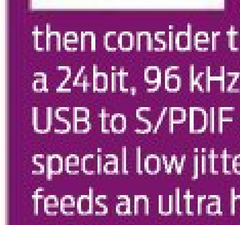
From £45



This ingenious device allows you to charge all your mobile devices in one convenient place and wastes no juice at all as it automatically shuts off power – including stand-by mode – after devices are fully charged. It even senses when new devices are added. www.belkin.com/uk/conserve

One For All SV9390

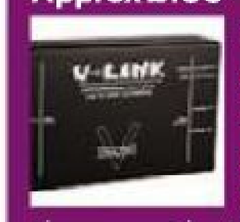
Approx £60



Looking like an upturned portable TV, this indoor aerial features multi-patch technology which has wider bandwidth than traditional loop or Dipole aerials. It can be placed anywhere – horizontally, vertically or on the wall – and provides a 360º reception angle without any loss in performance. www.oneforall.co.uk

Musical Fidelity V-Link

Approx £100



Do you want coaxial or optical audio from a computer? If the answer is yes, then consider the latest V-Link, a 24bit, 96 kHz Asynchronous USB to S/PDIF converter. A special low jitter power supply feeds an ultra high precision digital clock and enables the V-Link to 're-clock' the data coming from the USB port with greater accuracy. www.musicalfidelity.com

AirTies 4420

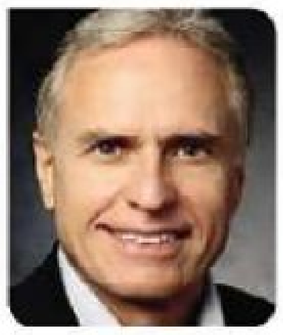


Approx £50

This uPnP-compliant wireless 300MBps media streamer features a USB jack to attach external storage and promises glitch-free streaming up to 50 metres – making it ideal for extending your network around the house. www.airties.com

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Remaster class



Before the Blu-rays of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *Taxi Driver* arrived, *Anton van Beek* got geeky with digital mastering guru, **Grover Crisp**

Senior Vice President, Asset Management, Film Restoration and Digital Mastering, Sony Pictures Entertainment. Grover Crisp's job title doesn't sound particularly exciting. Yet this affable American has one of the coolest jobs in home cinema, overseeing the Blu-ray releases of everything from classic films to the latest 3D blockbusters. But for once, when I meet him for a chat, we're not talking 3D at all. Instead, I want the skinny on two much-loved movies that are making their first appearance on Blu-ray.

So tell us about the Blu-ray restoration of The Bridge on the River Kwai.

Well, what's interesting about this film is that the studio did a restoration I was not involved in about 20 years ago. It was entirely photochemical and it was okay for its time. There were a lot of things that they couldn't do then. About 10 years ago, for the first DVD we wanted to release, I did a little more follow-up, and we did some new mastering at that time. And it was then that we discovered so many issues with the film materials. Things that were actually quite evident when you look at the print, but which tend to get buried as you collapse the resolution down from film or HD down to standard definition. So, when it was decided that this would be the next David Lean film to come out on Blu-ray, I decided it was time to start working on it the way we've been doing a lot of our other restorations lately. We went back to our original negative, we did a 4k scan of that and we kept the entire work flow at that level all the way through. It was about a good six months' solid work.

The issues with the film are fairly traditional in terms of damage and deterioration over the years; torn frames, things like that. There were scratches that ran for hundreds of feet in every single reel of the film.

More challenging, however, were the inherent issues with the production. There was a camera problem – one of the problems with this film we've also noticed with a lot of other Columbia Cinemascope films from the same period. The result is that the image jumps, a technical problem within the camera itself, so if you were to watch a print directly off the negative you would see this little jump from side to side, as well as some mis-registration where edges of characters seem



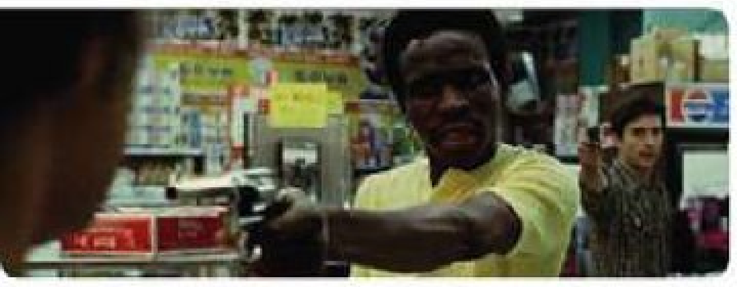
Before and after: The picture below illustrates the extent of the ghosting and mis-registration issues in *...River Kwai* that had to be corrected during the new restoration











Seal of approval: The involvement of filmmakers in film restoration is vital according to Crisp



Hard labour: *The Bridge on the River Kwai*'s restoration is the result of 'six months' solid work,' says Crisp







Candid camera: Flaws caused by the Cinemascope cameras used to shoot ...*Kwai* have now been corrected



to suddenly bloom out in the back. Those problems ran throughout the entire film. And you're kind of forgiving of things like that when you watch a print, but in high definition for Blu-ray, it's pretty unforgiving. So we decided that we needed to try and deal with those issues as best we could. And we spent a long time doing a lot of digital clean-up for those kinds of issues.

Our goal with this, as with everything we work on, is that when we do it digitally we still try to maintain the film look. Not necessarily a film made today, but certainly as if it were new in the period when it was made. So we didn't really do anything with the grain or anything like that. And I feel that if you treat it correctly in terms of your scanning and your resolution, some of those kinds of things take care of themselves.

Which brings us nicely to the Blu-ray bogeyman, Digital Noise Reduction...

Well, I really take the phrase home cinema very seriously, and the whole idea behind that concept is that you want to replicate that experience you had in a motion picture theatre. That's our operating mantra, so to speak, to try and maintain the original look and feel and sound of film.

Were you able to get anybody who originally worked on ...Kwai to advise in the restoration?

There is one cast member alive, it's Geoffrey Horne, who gets an 'introducing' credit on the film. But Jack Hildyard [cinematographer] is no longer around and David Lean is not around. We had reference prints, though. Also, because of the issues, at a certain point the film itself tells you where to go; you can only push it so far in one direction or another, whether you do it photochemically or digitally, like we did this one.

It seems that every fan posting online is a restoration expert with a clear memory of what the colour timing was like in a film they saw at the cinema 40 years ago.

This is an interesting concept. I co-ordinate a technical symposium a couple of times a year. Recently, someone screened a restored film that was made in the '50s. An audience attendee was watching the clip and remarked, 'Well, this film doesn't really look the way I remember it when it was new.' So, when I got to the mic, I said, 'When this was new, it was 1958! And you're telling us that you remember exactly how it looked when you must have been about eight years old at the time?' There really is not a good answer to that.





The other point is that there's not a film at all today that's going to look the way it did when it was originally released 30, 40, 50 years ago. Partly because the characteristics of the physical film itself change over time. Also, film stocks are different now, so you get a different colour curve out of it. The processing is different as well – the optics in the film printers are different, so a film printed now off the camera negative versus a film printed off the camera negative in 1945 is going to look different. It's going to look sharper for one thing, because the optics are sharper. The grain is going to look different on the print because the grain is different in the new film stock.

One reason that I showed ...*Kwai* digitally at the London Film Festival is because I think it's important for people to realise that they can digitally do all the work they used to do photochemically, at a high level, and maintain that all the way through the presentation and still have it look like a film. I just came from a test and the projectionist said: 'Yeah, it looks pretty good. It's a bit grainy here and there.' And I said that that's because some shots are grainier than others and we didn't want to do anything with that. So that's kind of what it's about – it needs to feel like a film.

Is 4k the optimal resolution for producing hi-def masters for Blu-ray?

Well we switched over a few years ago, especially when Blu-ray started to flourish. So, instead of just doing a film to HD tape transfer, we actually scan it at 4k. It doesn't matter what the film is or what the title is, we will do that high-resolution scan because we've determined, through work flow tests, that the scanning is the most important part. If it's a high enough resolution it helps the grain management, for example. You don't really have to do any noise reduction. And that is essentially the basic resolution of film. If it's a large format, 65mm, we may scan it at 8k to make sure.

Catalogue seems to be proving a harder sell on Blu-ray than it ever was on DVD, do you think that's down to a lack of consumer education about what the format does for older titles?

We're working on putting together some examples. One is with *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, just to show the difference between DVD and Blu-ray. We've created some split-screen examples, literally pulled off the discs, just to show. At the studio we have a showcase room and invite journalists and technologists in to show examples of this thing kind of thing.

What we're really excited about is being able to get as many of the classics out on Blu-ray as we >

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Gone fishin'...

Grover Crisp recalls a moment of absent-mindedness

'We were working on a new transfer of *Hook* a while back. Spielberg's representatives are always great and come in to look at everything. So, we were watching it one day with the colourist and he and I had been working on the film for weeks at that point. But we are looking at the film and when we get to the underwater scene with Robin Williams and the mermaids, someone says, "So, what did you do about the scuba diver?" I said,



"What scuba diver?" And he pointed and said, "That one right there." And, sure enough, in the background there's a scuba diver, really obvious, feeding an air hose to one of the mermaids. I looked at the colourist and we both shook our heads and thought, "how could we not have seen that before!" So, I guess it's somewhat well-known for having that bit in the background of that scene. When it came out on VHS and DVD, it was visible. I said, " I don't know – how do we remove an entire person?" We discussed it and felt it important to consult the director. He picked up the phone right then, made the call and the answer back from the director was that we should always try to preserve the illusion. I thought that was actually a good answer. So, we did a bit of work on the scene and, when it eventually comes out, if you know it was there, you can see it, but if you didn't know it was there, you would never notice it. Preserve the illusion.'

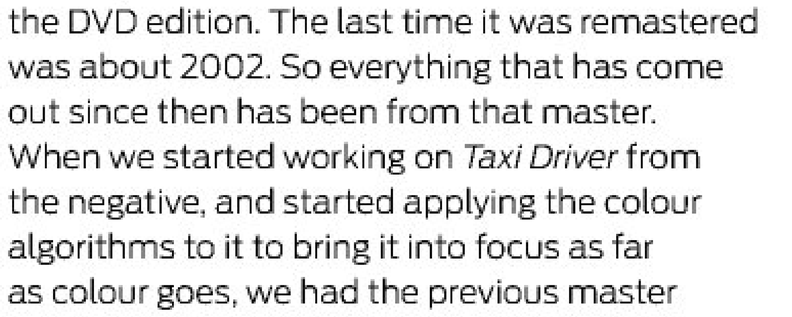
50th anniversary: Crisp and his team are restoring *Lawrence of Arabia* for Blu-ray

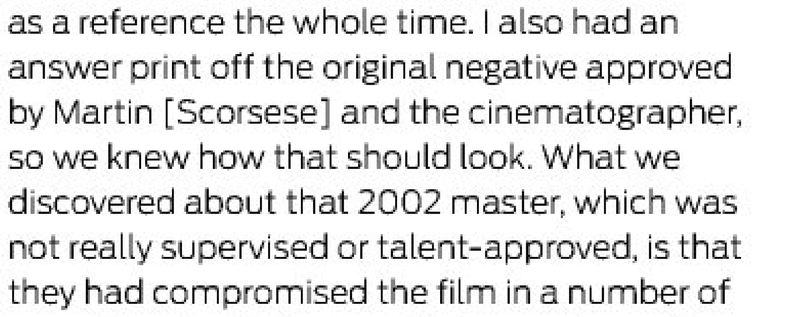
can. It's a little bit slow going. *Lawrence of Arabia* [tentatively scheduled for next year] will be a long, many-month process, because it has a lot of issues in terms of damage to the original negative. This is the first time the original negative has been used since the restoration that was undertaken some 20 years ago. Even then they just printed off it to make an element and never went back to it again. So all the prints that have ever been made for that film from that restoration are actually from a duplicate negative. And that work was good for it's time. But there are a lot of things we can do now that no one could do 20 years ago, no one could do 10 years ago. So we'll get there.

Taxi Driver has also arrived on Blu-ray. With this, the issue of grain retention is vital. In my head it's a film that's both gritty in theme and physical texture.

It's very interesting you say that. We had the cinematographer Michael Chapman come in, when we'd been working on it for a few weeks, and it was now ready for him to assess in terms of colour, density, etc, making sure it looks the way it should look, based on the fact he shot the film. We had this conversation while we were watching the film. I said to him: 'You know, a lot of people just think this is really grainy, grungy film in terms of the way it looks. But it's really not that grainy.' And he said: 'I know. I think it's because of the theme that everyone thinks it's this grungy, dark film.' But it's actually pretty crisp and sharp-looking for most of it. And we've done absolutely nothing to the grain. It is what it is.

Also, *Taxi Driver* looks different than it does on the DVD edition. The last time it was remastered was about 2002. So everything that has come out since then has been from that master. When we started working on *Taxi Driver* from the negative, and started applying the colour algorithms to it to bring it into focus as far as colour goes, we had the previous master as a reference the whole time. I also had an answer print off the original negative approved by Martin [Scorsese] and the cinematographer, so we knew how that should look. What we discovered about that 2002 master, which was not really supervised or talent-approved, is that they had compromised the film in a number of ways. They had blown up the image to avoid things like changeover cues, to avoid painting them out. They reframed incorrectly. The 'you talkin' to me' scene, for example, was seriously cropped on that edition. The shots were originally







You've been framed: The new restoration of *Taxi Driver* corrects the framing issues that plagued previous DVDs





from the camera looking at his reflection in the mirror, not straight on of him while he talks, but they had cropped out the side of the mirror to give him more headroom. You could barely see the gun he's holding!

What about the desaturated colours in the film's blood-soaked finale that were originally insisted on by the MPAA. Did you ever consider putting those back to how they were shot?

We discussed it, but the film wasn't just printed darker or muted. The two sections were actually cut from the camera negative and sent to a small lab in New York where it went through a Chemtone process. That opens shadows allowing for greater density and lower contrast. They delivered back duplicate negatives of the two sequences, in effect an optical dupe with the desired colour and density built into it. We've searched many times over the years for the original negative, but have never found it.

So, those muted colours are built into the dupe negative and there is no way to grade it or print it the way it was originally shot. You can't succesfully pump colours back into a film that aren't there. There have been attempts over the years, like the old DVD, but the colours were not right. The extra red in the sequence is in the walls, clothing, skin, everywhere. And we asked the cinematographer about this, and his answer was that we should follow the film. So the colour in a number of scenes when it comes out on Blu-ray, especially the last reel, will be quite a bit different from what it was on these DVDs and is more accurate to how it looked in 1976. That's one of the great things about Blu-ray

Read our in-depth reviews of The Bridge on the River Kwai and Taxi Driver, in the Playback section, pages 102 and 103

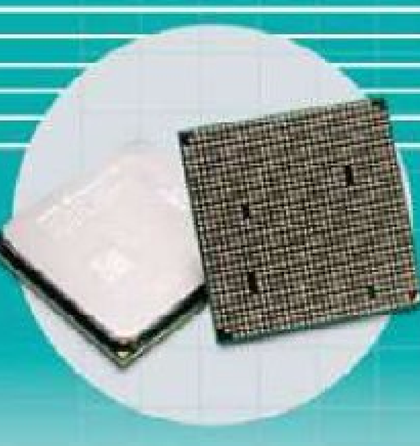
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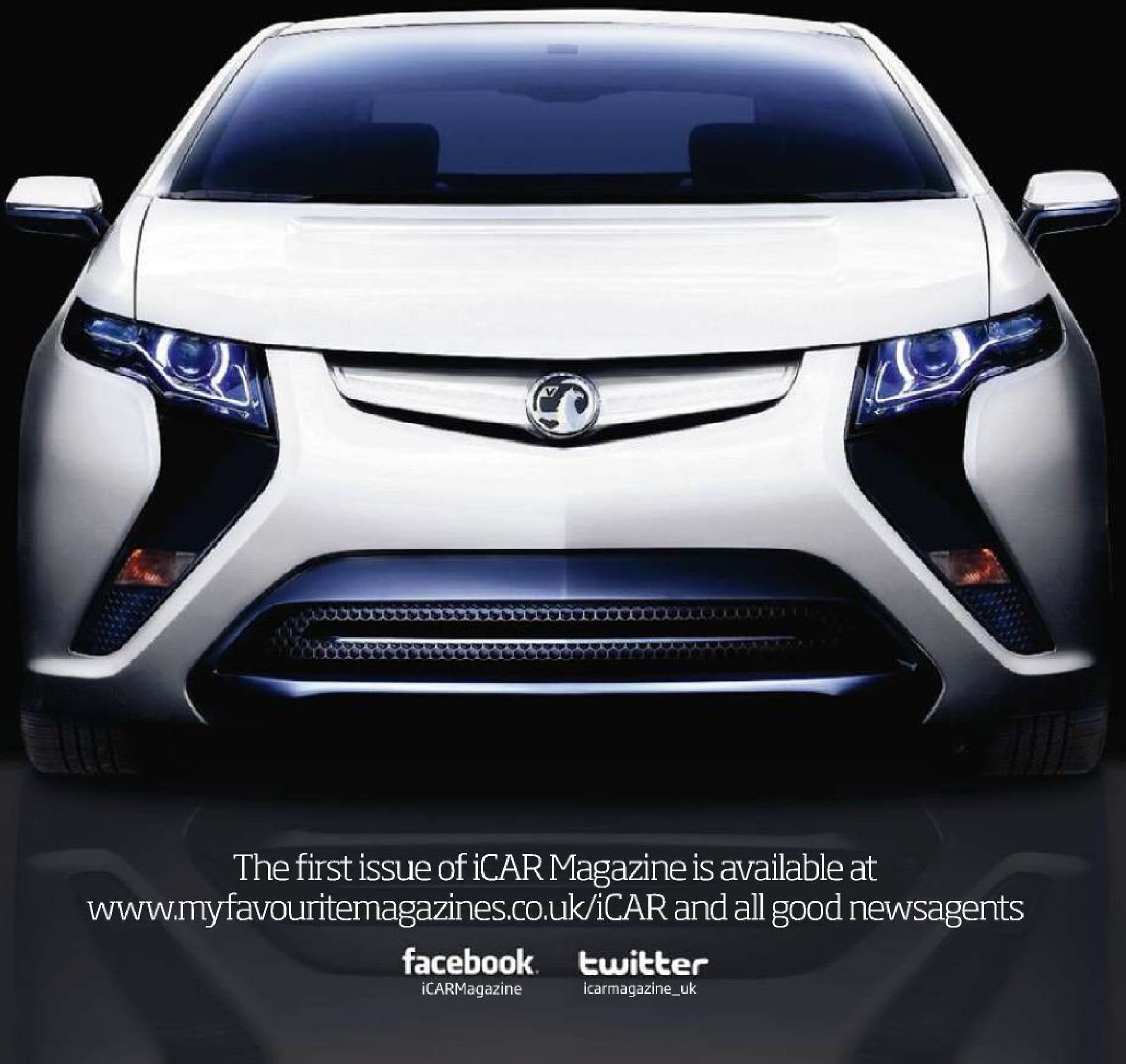
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PLAYBACK

→Software highlights **THE KING'S SPEECH** The Oscar-snatching movie makes the move to hi-def **THE GREEN HORNET** Comic book action just perfect for 3D **PLATOON** Vietnam war classic is a must-own **THE BRIDGE OVER THE RIVER KWAI** Lovingly brought into the 21st century by Sony Colorworks **TAXI DRIVER** NYC never looked so mean **AND MUCH MORE!**

Blu bloods

True Blood: The Complete Third Season →HBO
All-region BD



The arrival of new vampire royalty ensures more thrills in the third season of this sizzling supernatural series. Check out our Blu-ray review on page 104

HCC Ratings key

Dracula	1 2 3 4 5
Nosferatu	1 2 3 4 5
Selene	1 2 3 4 5
Blacula	1 2 3 4 5
Lestat	1 2 3 4 5



The lights were on but no one was home

Inside a processed world



7.1-channel mix adds much-needed pizzazz to stereoscopic virtual world sequel





Tron and Tron Legacy are films that enthuse and infuriate in equal amounts. Both the 'Original Classic' and its belated sequel are films that don't bear thinking about too hard, lest the plots fall apart like a spectacularly flimsy house of cards. Instead, both favour style over substance... and what incredible style it is!

Set inside a virtual world, the visuals seduce you into thinking that things would indeed look like this inside a computer. And that's how it works, until one of the cast delivers yet more dreadful dialogue that rips you straight out of the world the films create. But then another great action scene occurs to wash the banality away.

Chris Jenkins on picture: *Tron*'s AVC 2.20:1 1080p encode flaunts the film's age, filling the screen with rough-hewn, live action photography matched with crisp and vibrant (if extremely basic) CG visuals. While not the most attractive rendering you'll ever watch, it's about as accurate a representation of the film you'll ever see.

Tron Legacy is a different proposition in both 2D and 3D incarnations. It switches aspect ratios between 2.40:1 (35mm) and 1.78:1 for material shot using IMAX cameras. While this is a little annoying, there's no denying that the 1.78:1 footage looks simply incredible, and (unlike *The Dark Knight*) there's no off-putting edge enhancement in the rest of the material to compensate for the sharpness of the IMAX footage. The MVC 2.40:1/1.78:1 1080p stereoscopic version looks every bit as good as the 2D version. It's crisp, razor-sharp and rock solid, with no distracting crosstalk.



Mark Craven on audio: It's hardly surprising that *Tron* is showing its age a bit on Blu-ray with a DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix that is naturally limited by the quality and precision of the original materials. More unexpected is just how good its sequel sounds. Mixed in 7.1-channels for its cinema release, the Blu-ray's DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix perfectly complements its 3D visuals. It's pure reference-quality fare that makes incredible use of the full soundstage.

Anton van Beek on extras: A barebones 3D Blu-ray of *Tron Legacy*, a DVD copy of that film and a Digital Copy of the same count for three of the discs in this five-disc set, which leaves just the 2D Blu-ray versions of the films to search for extras. *Tron* fares best with all of the goodies from the old two-disc DVD, plus a couple of new featurettes. *Tron Legacy* is less impressive, serving up a trailer for the *Tron* cartoon, four featurettes, a music video and a suite of video clips and an intriguing feature that syncs up an iPad for more behind-the-scenes info.

HCC VERDICT

Tron Legacy 3D/Tron: The Original Classic → Walt Disney → All-region BD (US import) → £43 Approx (www.movietyme.com)

We say: Essential sci-fi Blu-ray

Picture: 1 2 3 4 **5**

Sound: 1 2 3 4 **5**

Extras: 1 2 3 **4** 5

Movie: 1 2 **3** 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

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The King's Speech

Momentum → Region B BD
£25 Approx



Having made off with fistfuls of awards, this account of how King George VI overcame his stutter with the aid of an unorthodox speech therapist now takes its bow on Blu-ray. While the film's story and style are very much that of a one-off ITV Bank Holiday drama, the astonishing central performances from Colin Firth and Geoffrey Rush lifts it above that. As for the disc itself, the AVC 1.85:1 1080p handles the 'teal and orange'-afflicted palette well and packs in plenty of detail. The DTS-HD MA 5.1 does a fine job handling atmospherics and those all-important royal speeches. ***MC***

1 2 **3** 4 5

Megamind: Double Play

DreamWorks → All-region BD
£28 Approx



Given the array of talent voicing its characters (Brad Pitt, Will Ferrell, Tina Fey), this animation from *Madagascar* director Tom McGrath falls surprisingly flat. Whether it's the unappealing character models or the laboured script, nothing about this film rises above the ordinary. Also, the disc isn't the reference-quality gem we expected. The native 7.1 Dolby TrueHD mix is a pure delight, but the AVC 2.40:1 1080p CG visuals suffer from odd bouts of shimmering and aliasing. Copious extras include a PiP behind-the-scenes to a new animated short. ***AvB***

1 2 **3** 4 5

Burlesque

Sony Pictures → All-region BD
£23 Approx



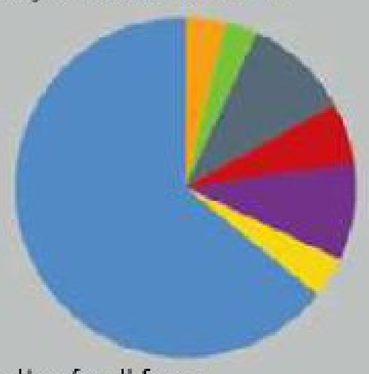
Christina Aguilera's debut feature tells the predictable and anodyne tale of a small town girl, who finds fame belting out musical numbers in fishnet stockings at a burlesque club. The AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode adds much-needed sparkle, with plenty of shadow detail to be found in the film's low-lit interiors. Better still is the potent DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix and the wonders it works with the film's musical numbers. Extras include six extended musical numbers, a commentary, five featurettes, a blooper reel, an alternate opening, MovieIQ functionality and a BD-Live link. ***AvB***

1 2 **3** 4 5

We asked you...

Which Star Wars film will benefit most from 3D conversion?

- The Phantom Menace 4%
- Attack of the Clones 3%
- Revenge of the Sith 10%
- A New Hope 6%
- The Empire Strikes Back 9%
- Return of the Jedi 4%
- None – converted 3D is always rubbish! 64%



Results of poll from www.homecinemachoice.com

Brash smash is par for the course

Comic book action hero proves predictable despite ample opportunity to thrill

The Green Hornet is undoubtedly a disappointment for fans of both the masked vigilante himself and of inventive filmmaker Michel '*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*' Gondry. With the latter at the helm and a slimmed down Seth Rogen playing the Hornet, something truly unusual was on the cards. But instead, what we have is a pretty standard mix of comic book action and tired comedy antics, with virtually none of the visual flair or creativity we'd been hoping for.

Chris Jenkins: *The Green Hornet* may not be a great film, but it does deliver some pretty spiffy looking visuals in both its 2D and 3D BD incarnations, both of which are spread across separate platters (much the same as Disney does with its 3D releases), with the stereoscopic disc only playing back in 3D-capable kit.



Masked men blow more than the doors off



The 2D version boasts an extremely agreeable AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode that does a superb job of capturing the film's often bold colour palette and intricate detailing – ably demonstrated by the restaurant showdown in Chapter 13, which goes from the vivid green of the Black Beauty's lights to the fine debris flying through the air following the explosion.

The 3D incarnation is much the same, looking ever so slightly duller, but still incredibly solid and making pretty creative use of the extra dimension during sequences such as the 'Kato Vision' and first fight in Chapter 4. It's not exactly 'in your face', but it's an enjoyable and accomplished 3D presentation all the same.

Mark Craven: Both versions of the film are accompanied by the kind of loud and brash DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix you'd expect from a comic book action film. No chance is missed to create some whiz-bang directional effects, with the car chase that runs through Chapters 14 and 15 proving particularly effective, while big explosions (as typified by the unusual escape from being buried alive in Chapter 10) pack in plenty of room shaking bass.

Anton van Beek: The 2D disc is stacked with goodies including an audio commentary, nine deleted scenes, a gag reel, six behind-the-scenes featurettes, MovieIQ functionality, a BD-Live link and a virtual cutting room allowing you to assemble your own clips from the film and share them with friends. The 3D disc ditches all of these, bar the commentary and BD-Live link, but adds its own dedicated bonus feature: *3D Animated Storyboard Comparisons*. Here you'll find 3D animated storyboards for seven sequences running below the clips from the film – although, weirdly, these film clips are presented in 2D! >



HCC VERDICT

The Green Hornet 3D
Sony Pictures → All-region BD
→ £30 Approx

We say: Oddly flat despite impressive 3D encode

Picture: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Sound: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Extras: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Movie: 1 **2** 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 **3** 4 5

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Release: StoreMags & FantaMag

Rubber

Optimum → Region B BD
£20 Approx



Quentin Dupieux's 'homage to no reason' will surely divide audiences. For no reason at all a discarded tyre comes to life with the ability to make people's heads explode using telekinetic powers. Meanwhile, a crowd of onlookers provide a meta-commentary on the act of watching films. It's pretty weird stuff, but also a lot of fun if you're in the right mood. The AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode looks fairly strong, but suffers from some edge enhancement, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio is pleasingly creative. Extras include four interviews, a trailer and test footage. ***MC***

1 2 **3** 4 5

Platoon

20th Century Fox/MGM → All-region BD → £20 Approx



Oliver Stone's look at the human cost of the Vietnam War remains an effective piece of cinema and one that should be welcome in any Blu-ray collection. The film's AVC 1.85:1 1080p encode looks like a typical '80s film, one full of rough grainy textures and thick blacks. It's not always attractive, but it suits this film particularly well and is easily the most accurate) presentation of the film I've encountered. The DTS-HD MA 5.1 is less impressive, coping well with ambient effects, but obscuring the odd line of dialogue on occasion. The disc is also packed with excellent extras. ***AvB***

1 2 3 **4** 5

The Doors: 20th Anniversary SE

Optimum → All-region BD
£20 Approx



Oliver Stone's asborbing biopic of songsmith Jim Morrison arrives on UK Blu-ray sporting a DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix and a 2.35:1 AVC encode. The HD picture quality will be a revelation for those still clinging to their DVD edition, with excellent shadow detailing and a naturalistic colour palette, although DNR appears to have been used, with a subsequent lack of grain affecting its filmic quality. The surround mix offers a healthy centre channel, makes good use of the rears and belts out music with gusto. Less extras than the US version, sadly. ***MC***

1 2 **3** 4 5

The Hustler

20th Century Fox → All-region BD
£20 Approx



With a career that covers star turns in the likes of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Hud* and *Butch Cassidy*... Paul Newman undoubtedly transcends stardom (Let's face it: he even had his own line of salad dressing). But he was never better than when he lit up the screen as amoral pool hall hustler Fast Eddie Felson in Robert Rossen's 1961 cinematic masterpiece. This Blu-ray release features an attractive AVC 2.40:1 1080p black and white encode alongside a moody DTS-HD MA 5.1 remix. Plentiful extras include a commentary, numerous featurettes, trick-shot examples and trailers. ***MC***

1 2 3 **4** 5

Rich pickings from Lean's masterpiece

Blu-ray makeover is present and correct as movie is restored to former Technicolor glory

The Bridge on the River Kwai finds David Lean at his absolute best. Every bit the equal to his later *Lawrence of Arabia*, this astonishing World War II epic stars Alec Guinness as Colonel Nicholson, a no-nonsense army man, whose obsession with rules clouds his loyalties when he and his fellow POWs are put to work building a bridge for the Japanese in the jungles of Burma. On a collision course with him is William Holden's Shears, an American who escaped from the camp and has been forced to return with a small team to destroy the bridge.

Chris Jenkins: This Blu-ray release and the 4K restoration that birthed it stand as a testament to the incredible work being undertaken by Grover Crisp and his team at Sony Colorworks.

The Bridge... needed to undergo an incredible amount of work to restore it to its original glory. And that's exactly what you'll find in this Blu-ray's AVC 2.55:1 1080p encode. Admittedly, there's the odd transition or optical that looks a little rough around the edges, but this is entirely down to flaws in the source material that simply cannot be undone. Away from this you're greeted by the kind of incredible detailing and rich Technicolor presentation that we always knew lay at the heart of the film, but had been prevented from seeing for so long.



HCC VERDICT

The Bridge on the River Kwai: Collector's Edition → Sony Pictures
All-region BD → £20 Approx

We say: Respectful BD treatment

Picture: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Sound: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Extras: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Movie: 1 2 3 4 **5**

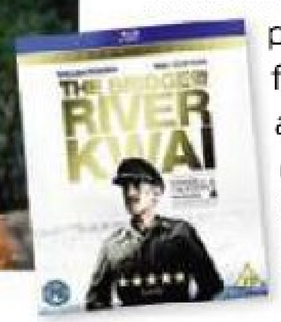
Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

Mark Craven: The Blu-ray's DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 mix is less immediately enthralling than the restored picture, but has itself gone through a restoration to bring it back to its original lustre.

As such, dialogue, music and effects all work as well as they every will (some gunfire and explosions sound a touch muffled), and for those worried about opening it up to 5.1 channels there's very little in the way of directional effects added to the mix, making it feel very sympathetic to the original elements.

Anton van Beek: While it's not chock-a-block with extras, what's here should certainly please the film's many fans. The big new Blu-ray feature is *Crossing the Bridge*, a glorified pop-up trivia mode that allows the film to play out in a window as reams of info (interviews, book comparisons, etc) are unleashed across the bottom of the screen. Joining this is a BD-Live link, 53min *Making of*..., a short extract from *The Steve Allen Show* featuring William Holden and Alec Guinness, an animated photo gallery with Holden discussing the film's premiere as the accompanying audio, a vintage film about the building of the bridge, another photo gallery, an appreciation of the film from John Milius and two trailers.



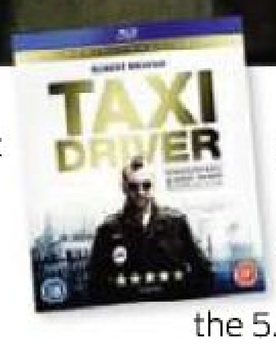


Cleaning up the mean streets

Blu-ray restoration returns Martin Scorsese's '70s classic to its original grungy glory



You wouldn't want to argue over the cab fare...



Taxi Driver remains the highpoint of the many cinematic collaborations of Martin Scorsese and Robert De Niro. And this 1976 masterpiece even had to beat *Raging Bull* and *Goodfellas* for that particular honour.

De Niro gives an astonishing performance as Travis Bickle, a chronic insomniac and disturbed Vietnam War veteran who gets a job driving a cab in New York in an effort to break out of his lonely existence. As he searches for his place in the world driving through the night, Travis becomes more and more repulsed by the filth that litters the streets and the people who inhabit them, before deciding that somebody – namely himself – needs to clean it up.

Chris Jenkins: Not even reading about the film's meticulous 4K restoration (on p94), could have prepared me for how absolutely astounding *Taxi Driver* looks on Blu-ray. Packed full of colour and detail, the AVC 1.85:1 1080p encode looks as about as clean and fresh as you could possibly imagine. Yet this is not the result of over-processing, but rather a long-awaited return to the film's natural state, as evidenced by the tightly controlled grain structure evident throughout. Simply flawless.

Mark Craven: A large part of *Taxi Driver*'s success in creating its pervasive atmosphere can be ascribed to Bernard Herrmann's exceptional score – and this Blu-ray's DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 mix does the best job possible of recreating it at home.

While the nature of the film and the age of the source material means that the mix isn't a dynamic as more modern titles, the 5.1 mix still does an excellent (and incredibly natural) job of positioning the audio around the soundfield and bringing the squalid New York streets to life.

Anton van Beek: This Blu-ray takes the best extras from previous LaserDisc and DVD releases and brings them together in a truly fantastic package. The highlight for fans is undoubtedly the 1986 Criterion Collection LaserDisc commentary recorded by Martin Scorsese and Paul Schrader, which never saw the light of day on any DVD incarnation of the movie. Joining this from the DVDs are individual commentaries by Schrader and film academic, Robert Kolker.

The old *Interactive Script to Screen* mode has been given a Blu-ray update that makes it much more immediate and user-friendly than it ever was on DVD. Also present is the 71min *Making Taxi Driver* documentary, six featurettes (running the gamut from tributes to Scorsese from his peers to an interview with the filmmaker and true-life stories from real NYC cabbies), storyboard-to-film comparisons, four galleries (Bernard Herrmann score, On Location, Publicity Materials and Scorsese at Work), the theatrical trailer, a BD-Live link and Movie IQ functionality. All of the video extras, bar the *Making of...* doc, are in HD. >







HCC VERDICT

Taxi Driver: 35th Anniversary Edition → Sony Pictures
All-region BD
£20 Approx

We say: An early contender for 2011's Blu-ray of the Year award

Picture: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Sound: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Extras: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Movie: 1 2 3 4 **5**

Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

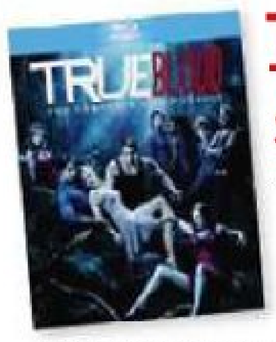
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filmfreakz.com

Southern gothic hits a high

Werewolves and vampires on the Mississippi? Sookie, the mind-reading waitress returns



True Blood The Complete Third Season continues the adventures of telepathic waitress, Sookie Stackhouse, as she goes hunting for her missing vampire lover Bill, following the shocking finale to last year's 12-episode run. This year's major storylines curb the craziness (a little), but still find time to add plenty of new wrinkles to the mix – the most dramatic of which is surely the long-awaited arrival of werewolves into the show's growing mythology. Add to this even more screen time for the show's best supporting characters (Jessica, Eric, Jason and Lafayette) and a brilliantly nutty new vampire in the form of Mississippi's vampire king, Russell Edgington, and there's plenty to love about this particular slice of Southern Gothic.



Who ordered the stake?

Chris Jenkins: As with past seasons, this latest run of *True Blood* looks sensational in 1080p HD. Okay, there's the occasional instance of banding, and the odd bit of shadow detail gets lost in the pervading darkness that shrouds so much of the series. But otherwise, all 12 AVC 1.78:1 encodes are glitch-free and wholly representative of the original source material.

Mark Craven: *True Blood* continues to impress with its sound design, which seems so much more accomplished than you'd expect from a film, let alone a TV series. Be it the subtle atmospherics of the swampy bayou, the swirling voices that accompany Sookie's attempts at reading a mind or the directional dynamism of a no-holds-barred fight between vampires and werewolves, the DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 mixes sound perfectly and drag the viewer right into the heart of the action. Couple that with some rich music presentation and perfect dialogue reproduction, and there's really nothing to complain about.



Anton van Beek: As always, each episode is accompanied by a Recap and Preview, and there's also an Enhanced Viewing Mode with PiP in-character videos, pop-up biographies and histories, plus links to previous and future episodes. The in-character videos (all 380 of them, running 61mins) can also be found on the final disc to be watched separately. Six of the episodes also get audio commentaries that mix a cast member with a writer or a director. Making their debut this season are Post Mortems for each episode.



HCC VERDICT

True Blood: The Complete Third Season
HBO → All-region BD
£50 Approx

We say: Great AV and an overall pickup in quality

Picture: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Sound: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Extras: 1 2 3 4 5
Movie: 1 2 3 **4** 5

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

Treme: Complete First Season

HBO → All-region BD → £50 Approx

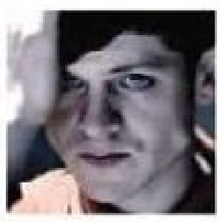


From *The Wire* writer David Simon, *Treme* lives up to our high expectations. Set in post-Katrina New Orleans, it's a show that eschews simple plotting in favour of dealing with the people and culture of the city as it sets about rebuilding itself. While the AVC 1.78:1 1080p imagery is superb, it's the lively DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio that really astonishes, thanks to the show's focus on music. Extras include episode and music commentaries, an interactive guide to New Orleans' culture, on-screen music info and a couple of *Making of...* featurettes. ***AvB***

1 2 3 4 **5**

Misfits Seasons 1 & 2

4DVD → Region B BD → £35 Approx



This TV series about 'superheroes with ASBOs' has grabbed a growing fanbase and a handful of awards, thanks to its superb young cast and brilliantly filthy scripts. This three-disc Blu-ray box (one disc f or Series One, two for Series Two) impressed us with sharply detailed AVC 1.78:1 1080i encodes that make the most of the show's distinctive visual style. Rather less exciting are the Dolby Digital 2.0 mixes of each episode. Extras across both series take the form of short, behind-the-scenes featurettes, interviews and bonus scenes. ***AvB***

1 2 3 **4** 5

Mad Men Season 4

Lionsgate → Region B BD → £40 Approx



America's most stylish TV drama maintains its high standard with this fourth run of 13 episodes. The remarkable show hits the right note all the way from the costume design to the enigma that is its central character Don Draper. Splitting the episodes across three BD50s ensures Lionsgate delivers spectacular AVC 1.78:1 1080 encodes that are every bit as sharp as Don's suits. The DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix isn't quite as impressive, but does what's asked of it. Superb extras include commentaries for every episode plus lengthy documentaries. ***AvB***

1 2 3 4 **5**

Archer: Season 1

20th Century Fox → R2 DVD
£20 Approx



This animated spy spoof follows the exploits of idiot secret agent Sterling Archer as he works for his mum (head of spy organisation ISIS) and alongside his ex-girlfriend. This hilarious show feels like the bastard lovechild of *James Bond* and *The Office* – which is no bad thing. While it's disappointing that there's no HD release, this two-disc DVD set holds its own with crisp anamorphic 1.78:1 transfers and lively DD5.1 audio for all 10 episodes. Only the limited extras are a letdown: just 21mins of *Making of...* featurettes, four deleted scenes and an alternate version of the pilot. ***AvB***

1 2 **3** 4 5

Summer Wars

Manga → Region B BD
£20 Approx



Anime director Mamoru Hosoda builds on the success of his charming 2006 adaptation of *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* with this beguiling animated feature about the importance of family, set against the backdrop of a global holocaust caused by a rogue AI invading an omnipresent *Second Life*-style virtual world. The AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode is bursting with colour and handles the typically diffuse *Madman* animation style with ease, while the Dolby TrueHD 5.1 audio (in Japanese or English) features excellent separation. Extras are limited to interviews and trailers. ***MC***

1 2 3 **4** 5

Confessions

Third Window → Region B BD/R2 DVD → £28 Approx



This shocking school drama is far removed from the candy-coloured worlds created by Tetsuya '*Kamikaze Girls*' Nakashima for his earlier hits. This is a considerably darker film (in tone and style), but it isn't long before the sheer amount of visual imagination on show reassures you that this shocker is indeed the product of one of Japan's most gifted filmmakers. The Blu-ray features a pristine AVC 1.78:1 1080p image and beautifully nuanced DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix. A bonus DVD is given over to a 70min *Making of...*, a 17min interview featurette, trailers and TV spots. ***AvB***

1 2 3 4 **5**

Woochi: The Demon Slayer

Cine Asia → All-region BD
£25 Approx



Kang Dong Won stars as the titular wizard in this Korean box office smash. The action scenes and amazingly accomplished visual effects provide plenty of thrills, but it's the playful performances and engaging characters that make this time-hopping, action-fantasy-comedy such a joy to watch. Good, too, are a cleanly rendered AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode and nicely balanced (if never truly explosive) DTS-HD MA 5.1 Korean language track. Extras include deleted scenes, endless featurettes and an audio commentary by Asian film experts. ***MC***

1 2 3 **4** 5

Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives

New Wave Films → All-region BD
£20 Approx



Apichatpong Weerasethakul's unlikely Palme d'Or winner tells of a man who, in dying, recalls encountering ghosts and forest creatures in his past lives. It's a beguiling piece of cinema, and New Wave Films make a strong impression with its debut Blu-ray, packing in a bright and clear AVC 1.85:1 1080i50 encode and atmospheric Thai DTS-HD MA 5.1 and LPCM 2.0 soundtracks. Extras include an interview with the director, deleted scenes (at 24fps), a short film and trailer. ***AvB***

1 2 3 **4** 5

Swords, sandals and sexploitation

Gory Roman-epic-flavoured TV series lacks subtlety, but wins on detailed visuals



Spartacus: Blood and Sand – The Complete First Series is the ultimate in 'guilty pleasure' TV. Never afraid to push the boundaries of taste and decency, this 13-episode debut season of the rollicking, 'adults only' take on the historical story of gladiator-turned-slave-rebellion-leader Spartacus is awash with gore, sex and the most ribald and inventive swearing since *Deadwood* left our screens. It makes up for its rampant dumbness with *300*-style action scenes and plenty of naked romping (featuring everyone from Lucy 'Xena' Lawless to, gulp, John Hannah). Tremendous fun for lovers of trash TV.

Chris Jenkins: *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* wears its visual inspirations on its sleeve – most notably *Gladiator* and *300* – and as a result is one of the most stunning shows around at the moment. So it's just as well that this Blu-ray set's AVC 1.78:1 1080p encodes do such a good job of rendering it in hi-def. Every individual hair, wrinkle and grain of sand is clearly visible, while the colour palette is 100 per cent true to the source. The only real downside is that the extraordinary clarity of the image often serves to reinforce how shoddy many of the show's green screen effects really are – but you can't exactly fault it for that.



Mark Craven: Each episode in the set comes with a Dolby TrueHD 5.1 soundtrack that is every bit as aggressive and unrelenting as the gladiators that populate the series. Naturally, it's the many bouts of gladiatorial combat that provide the most powerful and visceral acoustic moments, but even quieter scenes positively drip with taut, atmospheric effects and immersive surround elements. It's not exactly subtle, but for a show as cartoonishly violent as this one, that's definitely a good thing.

Anton van Beek: There's a smattering of episode commentaries scattered across the four-disc set. However, rather unhelpfully, they're all hidden away in the 'episode select' menus, so if you go looking in the Special Features or Set-Up menus, or opt to 'Play All', you'll probably never come across them. On top of that, each episode also features a *Spartacus Historicus: Pop Up History* trivia function, and the final disc houses seven behind-the-scenes featurettes, a gag reel, a compilation of action scenes and a trailer all in HD.



HCC VERDICT

Spartacus: Blood and Sand – The Complete First Series → Anchor Bay → Region B BD → £50 Approx

We say: Unleashes all the sex and death you could want on BD

Picture: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Sound: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Extras: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Movie: 1 2 3 4 **5**

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5



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How we test

Home Cinema Choice's hardware reviews combine the subjective opinion of our seasoned reviewers with hard technical data. **Chris Jenkins** explains how the *HCC* Tech Labs work

HCC hardware reviews combine the opinions of our experienced reviewers with objective technical data from our test lab. Here's how we do it...

HCC's gear reviews have a long tradition of combining the subjective opinions of experienced reviewers with hard scientific data from our test labs. That way, you can be sure that there's no danger of favouritism or prejudice creeping into the reviews – when we combine the reviewer's opinions with the test data, we can be sure that the results we present to you, the readers, are honest, reliable and accurate.

For over 20 years, we have been developing testing methods for every AV technology from CRT TV and VCRs to the latest 3D flatscreens, multichannel amplifiers and media players. Our testers have been trained by the ISF, Tektronix, Home Acoustic Alliance and other industry bodies, and we use industry-standard testing equipment so we can be confident our results make sense in terms of manufacturers' claims.

Our Tech Labs set-up consists of two main facilities.

The Viewing Room

Used mainly for testing TVs, projectors and speakers, the Viewing Room is designed to reproduce the conditions found in a typical mid-range home cinema installation. Created by award-winning custom installers Pounds (www.poundstv.co.uk), it's completely light-proofed for testing of TVs and projectors, is partially soundproofed using Acoustiblok (www.acoustiblok.com), and has been acoustically treated and tuned using custom absorbers and diffusers by the experts at RPG (www.rpg-europe.co.uk).

The room has a resident Crystal Acoustics TX-T2 7.2 speaker system, Onkyo TX-NR5008 receiver and a Screen Research 100in projection screen. TVs, projectors and amplifiers are moved in as needed for testing. We use a TV stand from Gecko (www.gecko-furniture.co.uk) for mounting flatscreens. A Philips 46PFL9705H TV is used for 3D movie and games playback. The room is fully cabled with speaker, HDMI, and interconnects from Peerless. Multiple displays can be fed from the same source using a Gefen 2-in-4-out HDMI switcher/splitter, and the room is also equipped with network connections.

The testing equipment used for TVs and projectors is the Chroma5Pro meter and ChromaPure Pro software supplied by Kalibrate Ltd (www.kalibrate.co.uk).

This sophisticated tristimulus colorimeter and analysis software allows us to measure functions such as contrast ratio, colour temperature and luminance, all essentials in picture performance.

The Test Lab

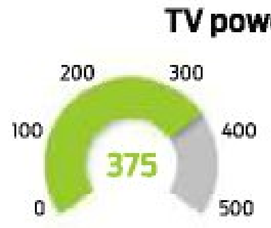
Mainly used for performance analysis of amplifiers and players, the Test Lab is equipped with an Audio Precision APX585 multichannel analyser. This generates programmable test signals, and runs a huge range of tests of functions such as output power, frequency response and distortion. It also has digital audio test functions. A Tektronix VM700 is used for analysis of analogue video signals.

Cables for the test system are again from Peerless.

In addition to the main test units, we use a number of audio and video signal generators from Sencore and Snell & Wilcox, analogue test equipment such as a oscilloscope, mains power meters from Maplin, a library of test and measurement DVDs and Blu-rays (plus all the newest software releases), and standardised digital files for media players.

Tech Lab tests explained

TV power consumption: Watts



White screen: This is a measurement of a display's power consumption in Watts when displaying a pure white 100IRE signal with muted audio



Test footage: Here the power consumption is measured with a looped test sequence of live footage (complete with explosions!) and the audio volume up

TV contrast: ratio



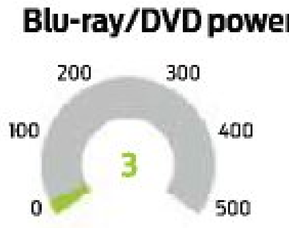
Picture: Contrast ratio claims by TV manufacturers are often extravagant, and don't follow an established standard. Our real-world measurements cut through the hype and allow one brand's contrast to be compared with another in a consistent way

Colour temp: Kelvin



Presets: Most TVs default to a picture setting, which is too bright and 'hot' (blue), in order to make them look good in shops, but also have a choice of colour temperature presets. We tell you which of these gets closest to the industry standard setting of 6,500K (D65)

Blu-ray/DVD power consumption: Watts



Idling: By EU regulation, standby power consumption for most devices is now under 1W, so we don't usually measure this; but the consumption when power is on can be considerably higher, so we measure this for DVD and Blu-ray players and some other devices



Playing: When a disc is spinning, the device's power consumption usually rises, so we measure when playing a standard disc. In theory, media players should display no change in consumption when playing

Audio Jitter: Ps



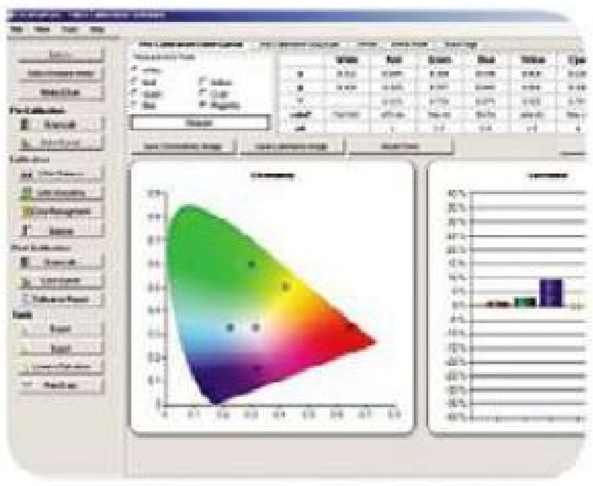
Sound: The analogue audio jitter from a device such as a Blu-ray player is measured in picoseconds. The lower the number, the better. Though analogue audio output is perhaps rarely used, jitter is often a good indicator of the general build and component quality of many devices

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Test bench: The Viewing Room (above) simulates a typical home cinema, while the MSI laptop runs test software for the APX585 analyser (right) and ChromaPure system (above right)



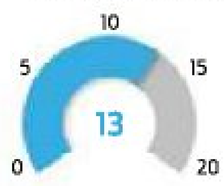


For testing of media software and portable testing applications, we use an MSI GT640 laptop PC with HDMI output and SRS sound.

Results

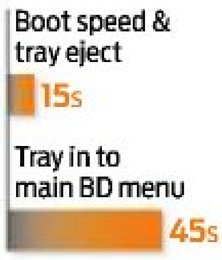
All this testing generates a huge mount of data, which is fed into product reviews and stored on our database. From this we can establish performance averages which help us to keep our scoring realistic. Of course, this mass of information is too unwieldy and detailed to publish in the magazine unedited, so our next job is to present it in a way which is meaningful and easy to understand. Our graphical presentations (see below) should make it all more digestible. So, while one key reviewer is normally by-lined for our tests, the whole team will have been involved in bringing you results you can rely on

Video Jitter: Ns



Vision: Again, the analogue video jitter of a DVD or BD player may be less relevant when the digital output is normally used, but it is a good indicator of general build and component quality. We also measure other video quality indicators such as chroma crosstalk and frequency response at 5.8MHz

Loading: Boot/Java



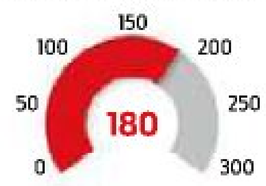
Disc loading & Java: Blu-ray disc players can be annoyingly slow to load and play discs, thanks mainly to the DRM and Java content. We measure times from power on to tray opening, and tray in to boot menu on a standard BD disc

AVR power: Watts

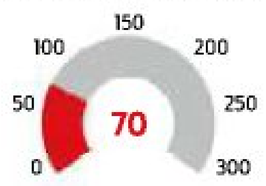


Powered: Power consumption of an AV amp can be high, but it's a requirement of decent output levels. We measure consumption in two states, when idle, and when loaded with a multichannel surround system

Amp output power: Watts (8Ω , 0.5% THD)



2-channel 8Ω: Manufacturers' claims for amplifier output power can be wildly exaggerated, and testing standards vary widely. Our tests deliver a figure for stereo performance with an 8Ω load, and quote a Total Harmonic Distortion result



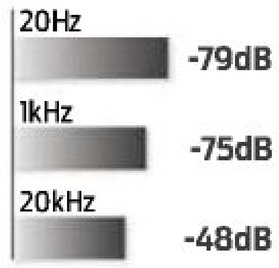
5-channel 8Ω: In most cases, multichannel performance will not match up to the two-channel figure. We push the products to its limit in multi-channel mode and quote the figure reached before unacceptable distortion results

Pure power: Watts



Fidelity firewall: This is our way of measuring an amp's output power ability before it is tainted by distortion. We measure at 1KHz with an 8Ω load to 0.05% THD to get an indication both of output power and component quality

Signal/noise: dB



S/N tests: These amp measurements reveal the ratio of signal to noise at a specific frequency. Low, mid and high readings are taken to determine the imaging and sonic character of the amp

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Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Want to comment on current technology? Need to share? **HCC** is here to help

Make 'em fit

Splitting the *Lord of the Rings* Extended Editions across two Blu-rays is crazy – this is new technology! Why are the films being split? Remove the commentaries and beef up the quality.

Not entertaining: load up the Blu-ray player, lay out your snacks and watch the movie only to have to get up, wash food off your hands, then change the disc.

Entertaining: load up the Blu-ray player, lay out your snacks and watch the movie to the end uninterrupted...
Anonymous, via the website


Kilroy was 'ere...

It is inconvenient, but our resident software geek, The Beek, says he'd rather the extended edition *LOTR* movies were split across two platters to keep the bitrate highs: 'We've already had one Blu-ray release of the trilogy that was sub-par in picture quality, I don't want to see another. If getting the best presentation possible at home involves splitting the films over two discs (and don't forget the extended version of *Return of the King* is 251 minutes long), then that's fine by me.'

Super Audio CD

I've just been reading the latest edition of *Home Cinema Choice* (June) and in particular the correspondence about SACDs (Fox hunt!). You were interested in knowing if readers own SACDs. Well, I certainly do – at least 1,000, most of which are classical music – and I continue to buy them pretty regularly. I have a dedicated Sony SACD player as well as a Meridian G91 DVD/CD player, not to mention a Panasonic Blu-ray player. I guess I am a bit of an audiophile/videophile as I want >

Star Letter

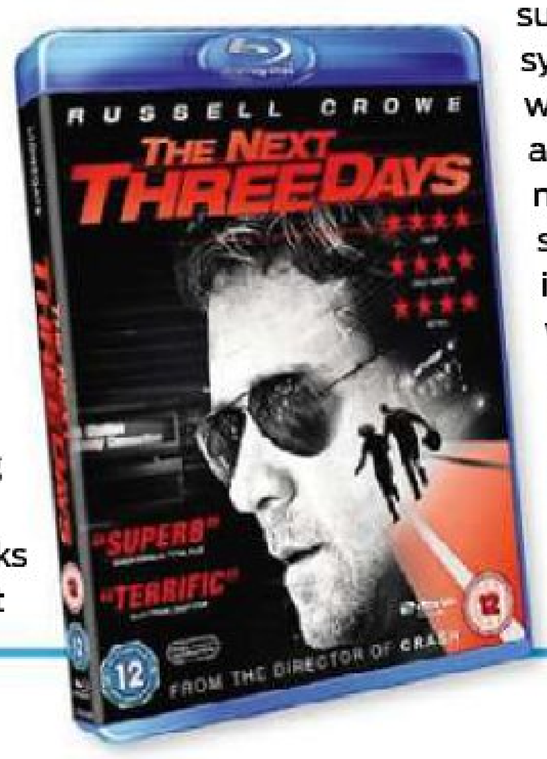
Upgrading my all-in-one-system

I have a Philips HTS9800W all-in-one system that uses a box with a digital audio input connector. If I connected a Blu-ray player to this, would I get stereo or surround? The manual only gives a CD recorder as an example. The Philips sub is also connected to the junction box. If I got an AVR plus a new sub, could I connect the Philips speakers?
Denis Long, Cork, Ireland

The HTS9800W, like most other 'all-in' systems, has its limits when you want to upgrade. You will, however, be able to enjoy digital surround sound by plugging the coaxial output of a BD player into the corresponding input of the HTS9800W's junction box. This system lacks a HDMI input, and so the best you can hope for is Dolby Digital or DTS – not their better-quality lossless iterations. In addition, the sub also contains the power amplifiers for the front and centre channels – there's no line-level output for an active sub, so you can't upgrade your woofer.

You could use the satellite speakers supplied with this Philips system in conjunction with a new subwoofer and AVR as a 'stop gap' measure (set the speaker sizes to 'small' in setup), but they would be the weakest link of any proposed audio chain. In any case, you'd need to remove the proprietary plugs from the Philips cables, and identify their polarity so they can be correctly connected to your new AVR.

With that in mind we recommend starting from scratch. Shop around, and you'll get a decent 5.1 sub/sat speaker system, Blu-ray player and HDMI-capable AVR for well under £1,000. Another possibility is Onkyo's HTS-3305, which combines an AVR and 5.1 sub-sat speaker package. This has a current street price of around £300. Chuck in a good budget Blu-ray player such as Panasonic's DMP-BD75 for less than £100 and you're laughing – the Onkyo AVR even has plenty of inputs for hooking up extra kit.



Winner: Star Letter-writer Denis wins a copy of *The Next Three Days* on Blu-ray, courtesy of Lionsgate Home Entertainment. It's available to buy May 16, priced £25 approx.

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to listen to my music and watch my movies with the best quality equipment that I can afford.
I have to say that in the majority of cases my SACDs sound absolutely terrific, especially in multichannel sound where you invariably feel as though you're right there in the middle of the studio or concert hall. What can be better than that?
Rob Cawthorne, via email

You asked in your June 2011 issue whether readers owned any SACDs. I can confirm I have a large collection of SACDs and an equally large collection of DVD-As. In addition, all my CDs have been ripped to FLAC files using the excellent dBpoweramp and played back using a Logitech Squeezebox Touch, which gives better results than a high-end CD player (the data is bit-perfect, as no 'on the fly' error correction is required as the CD isn't being read in real time). This is topped off by a small collection of 24-bit reference standard FLAC files from the B&W collection.
Clearly, therefore, I'm firmly in the 'quality rather than convenience' camp and this dictates my choice of disc spinner. At the moment I have an aged Denon 3910 connected to my Denon AVC-A1HDA amp via Denon Link for SACD/DVD-A duties and a Denon DVD-2500BT transport handling Blu-ray duties.

The ability to playback multichannel SACD and DVD-A will, therefore, be essential when I eventually move to a single universal player... and it needs to have at least as good, if not better, audio quality as my current setup.

So please, continue to highlight audio capability in your reviews of Blu-ray players.
Tennant, via his iPad

Thanks for your views Rob and Tennant (and regular reader Dave Lockwood who also emailed in). It seems that multichannel hi-res audio is something that a lot of us still believe in. Let's all throw our iPods in the bin!



SACD: You can get thrash metal discs, too...

I want quality

So, Oliver Stone says, 'Watching my children and friends looking at a movie on a computer screen with the lights on, with interruptions, trying to multi-task, is very depressing.'
I couldn't agree more. If I'm watching a film I have to give it 100 per cent full attention, or I haven't watched it, in my opinion. A film is made by the way it is assembled; subtleties such as the timing of cuts or audio cues can change the mood drastically.

People who complain about Blu-ray, or watch films online, are nothing but cheap whiners as far as I'm concerned.

I don't see the point in watching a crappy low-res version on my phone. I want the whole package, top-quality picture and lossless audio for my cinema room. I want to feel my seats shake and become absorbed into the movie, not to be interrupted every time there's an announcement on the train or someone on the bus wants to sit next to me.
Anonymous, via the website

Time travel

I have a digital subscription to *HCC* and I was wondering why I get the magazine of June in the beginning of April? Does that mean that in December 2011 I get a magazine from February 2012?
Michel Zuyderwijk, Netherlands

Welcome to the wonderful world of magazine cover months – which get very confusing when you publish 13 issues a year. We've had to invent a month called Awards...

Network advice

I'm hoping to move house this year, which is going to give me an opportunity to overhaul my home cinema setup. I also have an extensive collection of DVDs, (over 1,000) and am looking to store these digitally.

The problem I've got is uncertainty as to how to progress. I would consider myself computer savvy, but I've tried to look around to see which method offers the best solution, but can find no unbiased reviews anywhere.
I know a little about Network Attached Storage, media streamers and media players, but find it all a bit confusing. What are the differences between them? Obviously there will be pros and cons for each, but trying to garner enough information to make an educated judgement is not easy.

I have already started collecting HDDs, with the purchase of a 2TB drive to which I intend to start storing my collection, but would like to know the best way to proceed to get the best from wi-fi so that I can access all this on both my projector and TV. (Not simultaneously, by the way).

Another bug-bear is that manufacturers should put a minimum of two HDMI outputs on their AVRs for those of us who have both a TV and projector. Or is there a method of sending the signal from one HDMI output to both that I'm not aware of?

More and more of us are contemplating a network-based approach to AV media. At the top of this particular tree are proprietary systems such as Kaleidescape, with its custom user interface; but this starts at several grand. A Windows-based Media Centre PC can do a similar job, a lot cheaper, but not as elegantly.

But if you're prepared to put up with a slightly less comfortable driving seat, the same basic functionality can be assembled for a considerably smaller outlay. All you really need is a functioning home network (either cabled, or wi-fi), and a large NAS (Network Attached Storage) device. These have one or more high-capacity hard drives, and can often be expanded with your media collection. Capacities of over 1TB will be necessary for a large CD/DVD/BD collection.

The important thing is to choose a NAS drive which is compliant with DLNA – companies such as Netgear, Seagate, WD, Synology, Iomega and others all offer suitable devices.

DLNA enables a compatible media player to access the NAS drive. That media player can be practically anything these days – a TV, Blu-ray player, PC, laptop, AVR or a multimedia device. The player will support HD video and HDMI, and so will be compatible with your home cinema components such as TV and projector.

It's not uncommon for mid-range AVRs to sport two HDMI ports for displays, though only one can be used at a time.

The only real alternative is to invest in an HDMI 'splitter', in which case, make sure all displays fed from it are capable of dealing with the same refresh rate and resolution

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